The New Criterion

December 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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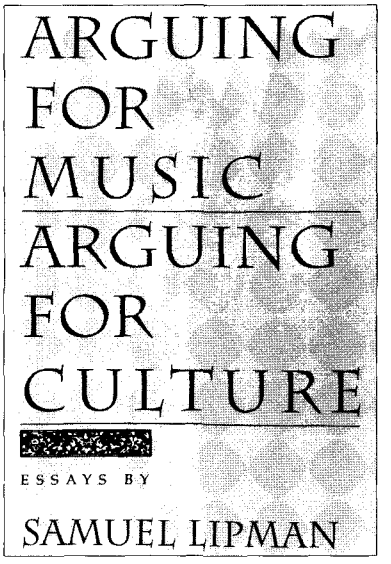
Essays by Samuel Lipman



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"There are a few, a very few, music critics who would be well worth reading even if you were tone-deaf, and Samuel Lipman is undoubtedly one of them." — John Gross

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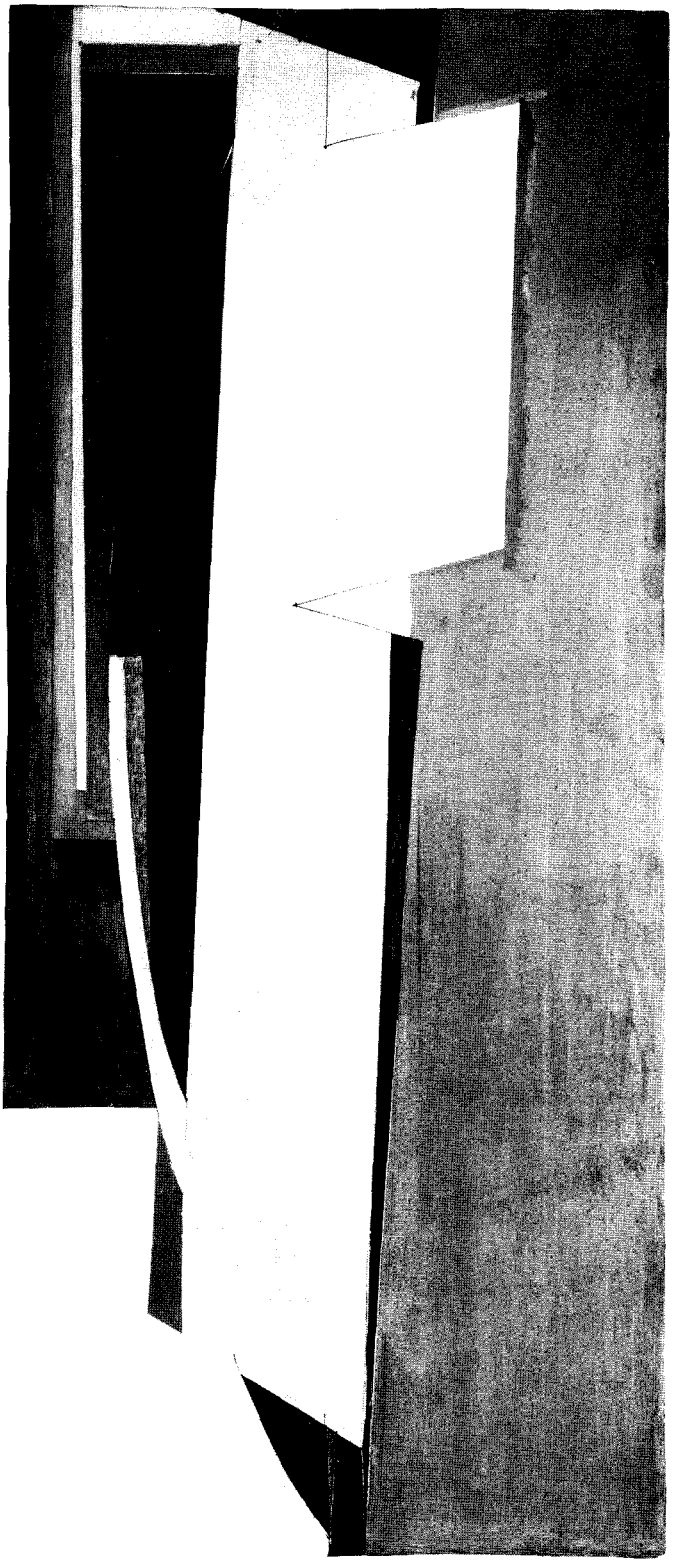

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The New Criterion *December 1990*

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Samuel Lipman's new essay collection, *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture*, will be published this month by David R. Godine.

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

Dana Mack reviewed the City Opera production of Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* for our October issue.

Alan Michael Parker's poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, and *The New Republic*.

Jed Perl's new book, *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World*, will be published in May by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

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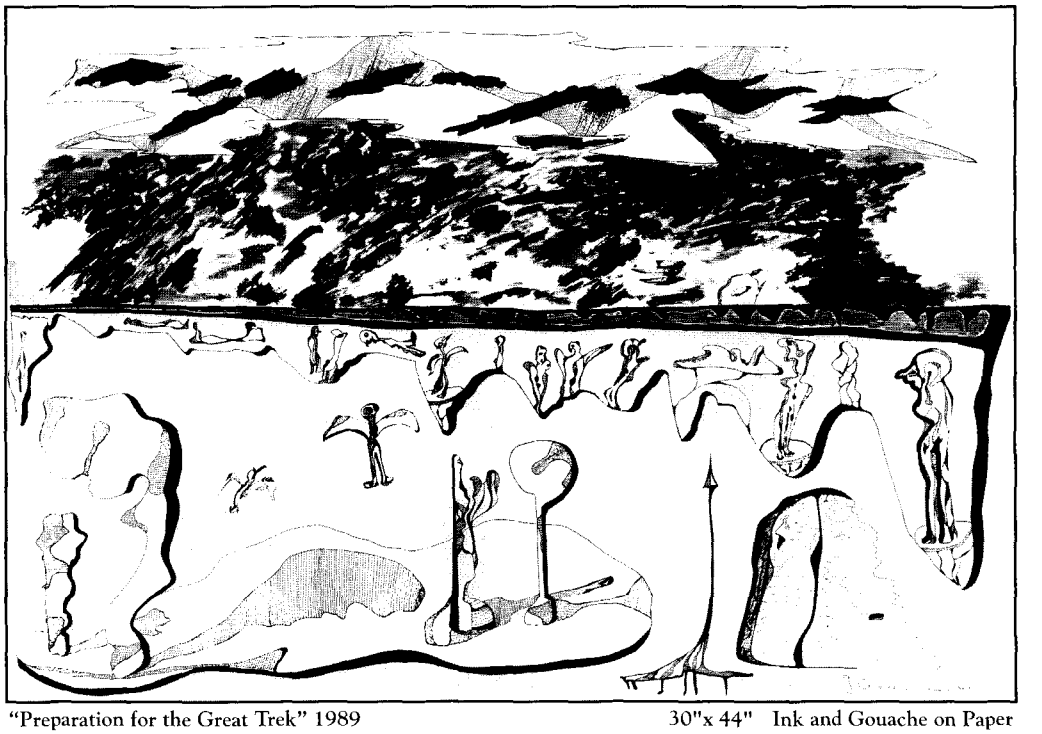

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Notes & Comments: December 1990

Western civ at Yale?

A light glimmered in the subfusc halls of academia this past September. Under the title "E Pluribus Unum," Donald Kagan, the eminent classical historian, former director of athletics at Yale, and now Dean of Yale College, addressed the incoming class of 1994, urging them to place Western civilization and culture at the center of their undergraduate studies.

One might have thought this an unexceptionable exhortation: What else should students concentrate on at our great liberal-arts institutions? Alas, as has become all too evident over the past few years, the idea that the monuments of Western culture deserve a special place in college curricula has become anathema. This attack on the priority of Western culture has been brewing for some time, fueled in part by accumulated ethnic resentments, in part by the puerile assumption that all cultures are equally valuable. The issue burst into public controversy in 1988 when Stanford University decided to scrap its year-long required course in Western culture in favor of a cluster of "multicultural" alternatives. Students could now study the writings of the terrorist Frantz Fanon instead of the works of John Locke; they could watch movies about Navaho Indian culture instead of learning about Periclean Athens. The impetus behind this development was infamously summed up by Jesse Jackson when he marched with five hundred students at Stanford chanting "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go."

The multicultural imperatives that surfaced at Stanford and a few other instititions have now become politically correct dogma at colleges and universities across the country. While some students and professors continue to resist the invitation to sell themselves short, academic administrators have typically joined in with the multicultural chorus, crooning loudly about "diversity" and "pluralism" as they set about dismantling their college curricula. Any dissent from the reigning orthodoxy is instantly met with charges of racism and ethnocentricism.

That a college dean at one of our premier universities should have the courage to undertake an unapologetic defense of Western culture in this stultifying atmosphere is as rare as it is heartening, and it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the arguments Dean Kagan advances. At its most extreme, he notes, the academy's attack on the traditional curriculum becomes a rejection of Western civilization itself—as well as a rejection of the study of Western civilization—"because of its history of slavery, imperialism, racial prejudice, addiction to war, its exclusion of women and people not of the white race from its rights and privileges." Less radical

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multiculturalists hold that Western civilization should continue to be studied but that it must assume a more modest place in the curriculum, becoming merely one culture among many, all of which "have equal claim to our attention." Both positions, Kagan contends, "are unsound." On the contrary, he argues that "It is both right and necessary to place Western Civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today."

To the objection that Western culture speaks only to those whose ethnic heritage is European, Dean Kagan takes a strong stand against this new form of racialism, insisting that the cultural and political achievements of the West are potentially available to everyone. He quotes the black American writer and civil-rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois, who—though deeply critical of American society—nonetheless affirmed the universality of Western culture. "I sit with Shakespeare," wrote Du Bois, "and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas . . . . I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil." Unlike our contemporary multiculturalists, for whom "Truth" is a white, Western, patriarchal fiction imposed on the credulous, Du Bois would not allow himself or others to be deprived of the wisdom offered by the West because of what Dean Kagan rightly called "the accident of race."

Furthermore, Dean Kagan argues, the assault on the Western tradition as a tyrannical bastion of racism and sexism "distorts history." To be sure, there are grisly episodes aplenty in the history of the West, but these are common "to almost all the civilizations known . . . in human history." Most of the "sins and errors of Western Civilization are those of the human race. Its special achievements and values, however, are gifts to all humanity. . . . " Indeed, what is important about the Western heritage in this context is not what it has in common with other cultures—a common legacy of oppression, inequity, war, and suffering—but the innovations that set it apart. More than any other culture, as Dean Kagan observes, the West "has asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting its power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate." Moreover, at the center of the Western spirit is a habit of self-criticism as well as "a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures." How odd that so many American students and faculty should have chosen this moment, when Western institutions and ideas are triumphing the world over, to declare Western culture "irrelevant, unnecessary, and even vicious."

Dean Kagan applauds the growing diversity of the faculty and student bodies in our colleges and universities. What he opposes is the concomitant growing spirit of racial and ethnic separatism advocated by the multiculturalists. A traditional motto of the United States has been "e pluribus unum": out of many heritages, one people. The multiculturists notwithstanding, the United States does enjoy a common culture,

> itself various, changing, rich with contributions of Americans who come or whose ancestors came from every continent in the world . . . . At this moment in history an objective observer would have to say that it derives chiefly from the experience of Western Civilization, and especially from England, whose languages and institutions are the most copious springs from which American culture draws its life.

Quoting Benjamin Franklin's grimly accurate observation that if we do not hang together then assuredly we will all hang separately, Dean Kagan concludes that students will be profoundly handicapped if they do not acquaint themselves with our common culture and that, consequently, there is a "great need" to make the Western heritage

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"the central and common study in American schools, colleges and universities today."

Predictably, the reaction at Yale to Dean Kagan's plea for the priority of Western culture was mostly hostile. There have been angry meetings with the dean, denunciations of his ideas, student demands for greater "diversity," etc. According to *The Yale Herald,* many "freshpeople" found his address "quite disturbing." "My parents were very frightened to leave me here," one student reports. The editor of another student newspaper was quoted as saying that "Taking European culture as the center is not only ridiculous, it is the seed of racism." Dean Kagan himself was roundly denounced as "intolerant," "paternalistic," even "racist." "Why can't these academic fascists leave us alone?" screamed a Yale senior in an editorial for *The Yale Daily News.* "I refer, of course to all the Aristotle-quoting Allan Bloom clones who insist on wasting campus newsprint convincing us that 'Western Culture' ought to be forced down our intellectual throats . . . " This fine product of an elite liberal-arts education confessed that he dropped a literature course because he found *The Odyssey* "boring."

Of course there have been students who spoke out in support of Dean Kagan. And in judging his critics, we should not underestimate the element of adolescent grandstanding, which is almost always an important ingredient in student agitation. But the widespread and shockingly philistine animus against Western culture evident in the student response at Yale, together with the growing spirit of ethnic and racial separatism, are grounds for deep concern. It is difficult not to admire Dean Kagan's courageous and clear-eyed defense of our common culture and our common humanity. At the same time, it is equally difficult not to see in the angry response it elicited a preview of that special brand of intolerance and intellectual conformity that the demand for multiculturalism is fostering on campuses across the country.

Leonard Bernstein, 1918-1990

Leonard Bernstein's death in October will strike many as the tolling of a bell, not just for this great careeer, but for the prospects once entertained for American music. Ever since he burst upon the concert stage at the age of twenty-five, triumphantly filling in for the venerable Bruno Walter as conductor with the New York Philharmonic on a Sunday CBS radio broadcast, Bernstein seemed to be the answer to American music lovers' prayers: a dynamic, exciting, homegrown genius bubbling with vitality. And when this young musical Tarzan turned out, with the writing of the ballet score *Fancy Free* (1944), to be a marvelously gifted composer as well, our native pride could know no bounds.

Those of us who who were fortunate enough to witness what now seems the infant Bernstein at the end of World War II remember an omni-talent: a conductor, a pianist, on occasion even a singer and, one easily imagined, a soft-shoe dancer too, a personality willing and able to capture each audience on its own terms. As his career unfolded in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it transpired that this exciting classical musician also had a flair for the Broadway-pop world; Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) quickly became not just a commercial hit, but a part of our own folklore. What more could we ask from a mere musician than that he bring together in his art European and American music, high and low culture? Then there were the Bernstein CBS "Omnibus" music-education programs on television; here, for the musical audience, was presumptive proof that the torch of great music could be, and was actually being, electronically passed on to the young.

For a time in the 1960s, when Bernstein was Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, and the first American to hold such an exalted post in our orchestral life, it seemed that the cultural circle had been squared. Bernstein's box-office success at the Philharmonic was indeed extraordinary;

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there was even a waiting list—how odd that sounds today!—for those who wished to become subscribers. And then it all somehow seemed to turn down. At the end of the 1960s Lenny (for that was how he was known to all the interested parties) resigned from the Philharmonic, the victim, it appeared, of an increasingly bad critical press. He said he wanted to devote his time to composition; instead he devoted his time to making a conquest, on the podium, of Europe in general and of Vienna in particular. From being a native-born American musical triple-threat, he became an international maestro, one of the three conductors alive, it was said (the others being Sir Georg Solti and Herbert von Karajan), who could actually sell out a house. He wrote a fairly limited number of new compositions, including a few works, like the much-plumped *Mass* (1971), that made a stir in the media; others of his late works seemed like nothing so much as the re-occupation of familiar territory.

As he grew more distant from his homeland, his once flamboyant political behavior also cooled. The erstwhile supporter in the 1960s of the Black Panthers, notably pilloried in one of Tom Wolfe's most savage and memorable attacks, he seemed reduced to sticking a finger in President Bush's eye when the President wished to award the conductor an arts medal; the *casus belli* appeared to be the controversy over purported censorship at the National Endowment for the Arts, but the overall effect was that of an aging *enfant terrible* who still wanted to be *terrible*.

Bernstein's death will have immediate practical effects on the domestic musical scene. The New York Philharmonic, just now planning the first seasons of the very German Kurt Masur as Music Director, had clearly been counting on extensive use of Bernstein's guest-conducting services to shore up the American aspect of the orchestra's activities; the Philharmonic will not find replacing him an easy task. However little interested in American music this quintessentially American figure had seemed of late, the sad fact is that as long as he remained active, he continued to be our best-known musician and our brightest musical personality. The sad news of Leonard Bernstein's death can only serve to remind us of what he, and we, had once hoped to be.

From the archives of the academy:

Wittig, Monique, b. 1935, French lesbian-feminist writer and activist now living in the USA, the first of "the new French feminists" widely read outside France. . . . *Les Guérillères* . . . openly stages a lesbian writing at war with patriarchal discourse. Devoted to the scriptures of their "feminaries," MW's Amazon armies annihilate the old symbolic order and, with it, practising patriarchs who maintain an allegiance to the phallus as master signifier. *Le Corps lesbien* . . . deconstructs both the sublimated and fetishized female body of masculine fantasy and the patriarchal body politic. Here MW represents a new class of speaking subject, neither men nor women but lesbian. . . . *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* . . . provides the forthcoming "golden age" with a lexicon in which the terms "mother," "daughter" and "wife" appear only as anachronisms, like "men" and "women." . . .

From *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, edited by Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy, and Patricia Clements; Yale University Press, 1990.

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The Varnedoe debacle: MOMA's new "Low"

by Hilton Kramer

With every passing day it becomes more and more apparent that the appointment two years ago of Kirk Varnedoe to the directorship of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art has placed this great institution in serious jeopardy. The evidence accumulates—and at an alarming speed—that Mr. Varnedoe has launched MOMA's most important department upon a course so disastrous that, if not promptly reversed, the very reason for the museum's existence might soon be in doubt. In every area of responsibility that has now come within his province—in his handling of the permanent collection, in his program of exhibitions, in his choice of appointments, and in his cockeyed revisionist reading of modernism itself—Mr. Varnedoe has quickly established an agenda that radically alters both the museum's function and its basic outlook on art. As a result, his brief but already ruinous tenure has brought MOMA to the brink of one of the gravest crises in its history.

Consider the record so far. No sooner had Mr. Varnedoe taken up his post than he eagerly presided over the sale of seven paintings—among them, works by Renoir, de Chirico, Kandinsky, and Mondrian—from MOMA's so-called permanent collection in order to acquire a wildly overpriced Van Gogh that the museum was in no urgent need of. So we were put on notice straightaway that here was another curator—why is that they always seem to come from Williams College?—who looked upon the collection entrusted to his care as a portfolio of "assets" to be liquidated as the gyrations of current taste and the dynamics of the art market dictate. The principal beneficiary of this ill-fated transaction wasn't MOMA's public but the Swiss dealer in whose office, I am told, the deaccessioned Renoir now hangs with a price tag close to that which Mr. Varnedoe had to meet in order to acquire the Van Gogh. According to Mr. Varnedoe, the Renoir was no longer deemed necessary to the "story" that MOMA, or at least Mr. Varnedoe, now wished to tell.

And what is the nature of this "story" to be? We were given a ghastly preview in the decision to allow the late Scott Burton, a furniture artist who was one of the many overinflated reputations produced by the art boom of the Eighties, to dismantle the museum's Brancusis in an "Artist's Choice" exhibition designed to elevate the sculptor's pedestals to a place of aesthetic parity with the sculpture itself. This constituted a betrayal of Brancusi's art that turned out to be a perfect paradigm of the way the objects remaining in the permanent collection would be dealt with henceforth.

Then came the publication of *A Fine Disregard*, the book in which Mr. Varnedoe made it plain that it was more than Brancusi's sculpture or even MOMA's collection that he was intent on dismantling. It was all of modernism, which was reduced—and traduced—in this book to resemble a species of Darwinian sport. One important aspect of *A*

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Fine Disregard is its categorical assault on the ideas of the late Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Mr. Varnedoe's great predecessor at MOMA who, not incidentally, had accorded the now deaccessioned Renoir a significant role in the "story" of modernist art. Mr. Barr is nowhere named in *A Fine Disregard*, but he is unmistakably one of the principal figures Mr. Varnedoe has set out to discredit in order to establish his own revisionist interpretation —and indeed, deconstruction—of modernism. And in the pursuit of this ambition, in which the intellectual fashions of the academy and the commercial imperatives of the art market are so cynically joined, Mr. Varnedoe has appointed a curator for contemporary art—the writer Robert Storr—who can be counted upon to keep all questions of quality, and no doubt a good many of the other fundamental questions that have shaped MOMA's past, from entering into the museum's future deliberations. A point of view that aims at discrediting Alfred Barr at the same time that it elevates a mind like Robert Storr's to a position of power and influence is not one that promises much in the way of disinterested aesthetic enlightenment in the decade ahead.

Not since the hapless John Hightower served his fifteen minutes as MOMA's director during the Vietnam War has a major appointment at the museum inspired as much apprehension as Mr. Varnedoe's has among those who follow—and follow closely—the vicissitudes of this great museum and its influence on contemporary cultural life. And since Mr. Varnedoe is a lot smarter than Mr. Hightower—and much less a figurehead—the reason to be apprehensive is all the greater.

Now with the debacle of the exhibition called "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture," which Mr. Varnedoe has organized in collaboration with Adam Gopnik, [1] his former student at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York and currently the art critic for *The New Yorker*, this roster of disasters that have already been visited upon the museum in a very short time begins to look like a mere skirmish in the war against modernism that is now in progress at MOMA. Both in its conception and in its realization as well as in its reigning ethos, the "High & Low" exhibition is the kind of full-scale event that signals a new era at MOMA—an era in which, among other things to be deplored, the achievements of modern art are subordinated to a sociological analysis of them. Taking his cue from the ideological initiatives that have lately reshaped the study of all the humanities in our colleges and universities, Mr. Varnedoe has clearly set the museum on a course that conforms to the practice of supplanting aesthetic categories of thought with those drawn from the social sciences. By this approach, art becomes a mere coefficient of material culture, and is thus denied precisely that element of aesthetic autonomy and transcendence that has been one of the hallmarks of the modernist spirit.

What this means for museological practice is perfectly clear. The epoch of the anaesthetic curator is upon us. In the "High & Low" show we are given a vivid demonstration of what results from a view of art that is completely removed from aesthetic considerations. There is a great deal of intellectual passion at work in the exhibition and in the massive—and massively foolish—catalogue that accompanies it, but very little of this passion is guided by aesthetic intelligence.[2] At every turn in the history of their subject, the curators are so utterly agog over the minutiae of popular culture—so infatuated with what might be called the archaeology of it—that its role in shaping modern art ceases to make a primary claim on

1 "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture," organized by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, at the Museum of Modern Art, October 7-January 15. The exhibition will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (February 20-May 12) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (June 21-September 15).

2 *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, by Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik; the Museum of Modern Art/Abrams, 460 pages, $60; $29.95 paper.

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their attention and becomes a merely incidental aspect of a headlong compulsion to explore the archaeology itself. Not only modern art but art itself is accorded an indifferent and precarious status in this inquiry. All the energy is elsewhere engaged.

In standard academic fashion, moreover, the accumulation of detail acquires a life of its own and bears at times only a remote and tangential relation to the ostensible subject under review. As huge miscellanies of undifferentiated information pile up and indeed topple over, it is more and more borne in upon us that the minds in charge of this project are not really much concerned with the aesthetic aspects of their inquiry. What we are offered in "High & Low" is less an explanation of modern art than a preposterously distended taxonomy of certain cultural materials that have been used in some parts of it. Never has so much miscellaneous detail been marshaled with such paltry results—paltry, that is, if it is modern art and not the varieties and vicissitudes of popular culture that is our primary focus of interest.

Some of the artists represented in "High & Low" are among the greatest in this century—Picasso, Braque, Miró, and Léger, among others—yet in not a single case is our knowledge of these artists and their achievement in any way enlarged or altered by the kind of attention they are given on this occasion. The primary beneficiaries of "High & Low" aren't these classic masters of modern art, whose work is held hostage here in a project that is alien to their spirit, but the artists who came to prominence with the advent of Pop Art in the 1960s, and the even more dubious talents who have more recently won an unearned renown on the contemporary art scene—unearned, that is, if aesthetic merit is our principal concern. An exhibition that concludes in a celebration of the work of Jeff Koons and Jenny Holzer—as "High & Low" does—may have something to tell us about the decadence and the politics that have overtaken cultural life in the last decade of the twentieth century, but it is an exhibition that has vacated the study of modern art in favor of a very different enterprise.

It is an enterprise that nowadays goes by the name of postmodernism, which defines the juncture at which the academicization, the politicization, and the commercialization of what was once an avant-garde meet and prosper at the expense of art itself. The key word in this enterprise is *context*, which can mean anything from a class analysis of the people who buy art to a race or gender analysis of the artists who create it and the institutions that support it. For obvious reasons—above all, because of its commodity function and its usefulness as a barometer of shifting tastes and values—popular culture is a subject dear to the hearts of the postmodernists, who can sooner or later be expected to "contextualize," as they say, every other aspect of cultural life until it comes somehow to resemble the objects of popular culture. As far as fine art is concerned, it is the purpose of this postmodernist mode of analysis to deconstruct every "text"—which is to say, every art object—into an inventory of its context, and thus remove the art object from the realm of aesthetic experience and make it instead a coefficient of its sources and its social environment.

There are also other, less theoretical reasons that popular culture is so dear to the hearts of the postmodernists: they like it so much more than they like real art, they are so much more at home with it, so much more at ease with its simplistic emotions and one-dimensional ideas. It may be that an immersion in the world of popular culture induces an illusion of eternal youth in these postmodernist curators, scholars, and critics who have lately disfigured the study of modern art with the materials that are given priority in the "High & Low" show—graffiti, advertising, comic strips, et al. It was, after all, in the counterculture of the Sixties, with its idealization of youth and its disparagement of high culture, that this momentous shift in attitude has its origins. When we turn to the authors' acknowledgments in the catalogue and find the junior partner in this collaboration—Mr. Gopnik—praising Mr. Varnedoe, the senior partner, as "an incomparable learner," we know all we need to know about where the

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ideas governing this exhibition are coming from.

Context is, in any case, the idea that dominates "High & Low," and this, in turn, is a melancholy reminder of the degree to which context has so rapidly supplanted connoisseurship in the study of art. We now have an entire generation of academics and their students in the field of art history who, while they purport to know a great deal about the production and consumption of art, actually know almost nothing about how to look at a work of art. Quality is not a concept—or an experience—that has any meaning for the contextualists. It is as if, from this academic postmodernist perspective, the work of art isn't really *there* as a free-standing, autonomous object. Certainly there is no evidence of a connoisseur's eye at work in the selection of the objects in the "High & Low" exhibition. I had hoped never again to have to see James Rosenquist's meretricious Pop mural *F-111* (1964-65) on display in a major museum, but there it is in the "High & Low" show commanding an immense space, just as if it were on the same level with Léger and Stuart Davis and some of the other masters of modern art. From Rosenquist to the scribblings of Cy Twombly to that idiotic display of Jeff Koons's vacuum cleaners—that is the downward course that is traced for us in "High & Low" with a grin and a wink that can scarcely conceal the satisfaction that is taken at this triumphant victory for schlock.

What we are finally left with in the "High & Low" exhibition isn't so much a study of modern art as an assault on it—and an assault on the way our understanding of modern art has been painstakingly built up over a period of six decades at MOMA in its collection, its exhibition, its publications, and the standards of connoisseurship that shaped them. What we are left with, in other words, is the spectacle of the debacle that is taking place at MOMA under Kirk Varnedoe's leadership. No doubt there will still be some good shows coming up at the Modern in the decade ahead—I know of several important ones, the shows to be devoted to Matisse, to Popova, and to Ad Reinhardt, among others—but the agenda that Mr. Varnedoe has established is already heading in a very different direction, and we can no longer have any confidence that the integrity of the museum will survive his tenure.

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The amoral superman: Bertolt Brecht in his letters

by John Simon

Readers unfamiliar with Bertolt Brecht's life should approach the new translation of his letters warily or not at all.[1] From Brecht's collected letters and the editors' notes, the uninitiated are unlikely to comprehend the man's character—if that word can stand for its own absence. An objective biography (the most accessible one in English is Ronald Hayman's)[2] is a prerequisite for the understanding of *Bertolt Brecht: Letters 1913-1956*, although the perceptive reader might get a fraction of the truth even from perusing this hefty volume. But he must be able to read as much between the lines as in them.

This is not an assessment I make lightly. I find it profoundly disturbing that a man several of whose plays I admire and many of whose poems I love should have been so reprehensible and gotten, as the letters show, worse with age. Who knows what he would have been capable of as his power kept increasing, had his heart not given out at age fifty-eight in 1956. Personally, I wish he could have lived to be ninety-two to witness the implosion of international Communism, the lodestar of his literary and political activity. But mulish as he was, refusing the most glaring evidence that contradicted his convictions, he would have found a way of pooh-poohing the facts as American propaganda. After all, he could seriously claim that a line in a German nursery rhyme, which he himself had sung fondly in his youth, was a recent American interpolation of a tendentious nature. It concerns, of all things, a dog on a pedestal.

Thomas Mann's son Golo, the eminent historian, who knew Brecht well, comments in his *Reminiscences and Reflections*:"What I liked about Brecht was his compassion and his anger; what I absolutely cannot stand about him is his tendency to preach, for which his Marxism is to blame. Marxism never did a writer any good if he swallowed it whole." But Golo Mann hastens to add that he is "not so blind as not to recognize the poet in Brecht." But Brecht's achievements in verse and prose are contrary successes: a theater that, priding itself on its alienation effect and analytical intelligence, could nevertheless grope its way to the gut; a poetry that, cool and slightly distant, could nevertheless—without noticeable change of pace, loudness, or temperature—send arrows shivering to their marks.

Brecht's letters were not intended as works of art. Yet even in his plays, Brecht was a man of the moment, a tactician. Nothing was permanent, unmodifiable; everything was to be constantly rewritten for greater timeliness and efficacy. Art was not so much a monument as a leaflet. Perhaps the most interesting thing about these letters, then, is their

1 *Bertolt Brecht: Letters 1913-1956*, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim and edited with commentary and notes by John Willett; Routledge, 720 pages, $39.95.

2 Ronald Hayman's *Brecht: A Biography* was published by Oxford University Press in 1981.

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finality. A play could be constantly revised in manuscript and between printings; a letter once sent was out of your hands.

If the quality of the letters requires a warning, so does their quantity. For this collection, translated by Ralph Manheim and edited by John Willett, is not complete. In 1981, Suhrkamp, Brecht's West German publisher, brought out a two-volume collection of the letters, edited by Günter Glaeser. The Manheim-Willett edition reprints most of the Glaeser letters and summarizes the others—often, I think, inadequately. This edition does, however, contain letters not in Glaeser, but most of these, too, as brief summaries. Recently, further Brecht letters have become available, and these will doubtless be included in the new Suhrkamp and Aufbau edition of the complete works, *Grosse kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, projected at thirty volumes, several of them already out. But even in this East-West edition, the correspondence may remain incomplete: Brecht's children, Stefan and Barbara, may not want all the letters published.

Still, this collection arguably contains enough to satisfy most English-speaking readers. There is, however, a further problem: the quality of Manheim's translation and the manner of Willett's editing. To put it bluntly, Manheim, despite his numerous translation awards and great reputation, is an unreliable translator. He reads carelessly, skipping over things; he misunderstands and mistranslates; and his English is often unacceptable. Willett is more thorough, and his notes are copious and helpful; but he is, regrettably, a confirmed leftist, whose editing, though he tries to be fair, is tendentious. These matters must be addressed immediately: if something reaches us through a screen, the screen must be recognized.

The letters, like Brecht's life, are divided into five sections here, each with its introduction. In the first of these, Willett mentions Brecht's "supposed" rejection of the 1953 uprising of East Germany's workers. Supposed? On June 17, when the East Berlin workers' peaceful march for better conditions was brutally squashed by combined Russian and East German forces, Brecht immediately sent letters to Party Secretary Ulbricht, Premier Grotewohl, and the Soviet political adviser. The letter to Ulbricht, which may be the most important letter Brecht ever wrote, is mistranslated by Manheim. I quote in toto Ronald Hayman's accurate translation:

> History will pay its respect to the revolutionary impatience of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.
>
> The great discussion with the masses about the tempo of socialist construction will cause the socialist achievements to be sifted and secured.
>
> It is necessary for me at this moment to express to you my allegiance to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

The most curious—and reprehensible—element of this letter is that "revolutionary impatience" or, in the German text, *revolutionäre Ungeduld*. It means that putting down an orderly march with murderous force is an act of revolutionary zeal. But how does Manheim (who, according to George Steiner's review of this edition in *The New Yorker*, has translated into "straight, faithful English") render this? "History will pay its respects to the patience of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany." To turn "revolutionary impatience" into plain "patience" strikes me as crooked and faithless.

I had neither the time nor the stomach to compare Manheim's translation and the original letter by letter. But some errors hit me in the face, and I pass on a selection of those, including samples of ungrammatical English. Thus we get "nauseous creatures, these artists," "leads us firmly by the hand" for *zu fest* (too tightly), "ate chocolate" for *gefressen* (devoured), and this gem of straight, faithful English: "I am permanently devoted toward you, Madam and me." "Devoted toward" is not English at all, and "Madam and me" is gobbledygook. The German text translates as "I am enduringly, abundantly devoted to you, Madam." The last

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word in the text, *Madamme*, is a folksy teutonization of *madame*; "Madam and me" is fractured German.

To continue: "*mich zu unterhalten*," which Brecht says his brain can't do, is "entertaining me" and not Manheim's "supporting me." "Positive benefits" is blatant redundancy. In a letter from Lake Arrowhead, Brecht supposedly writes Ruth Berlau, his mistress, "It's not normal to work if one goes out to work." What he actually wrote is, "We have a story conference in the morning, otherwise it's not customary to work [in America] when one takes a work trip somewhere." In letter 467, Brecht describes his Santa Monica environment as "not at all unpleasant, rather too pleasant," which Manheim reduces to a mere "isn't unpleasant." And where, in the same letter, Brecht uses the restrained *Kloake*, Manheim offers "shithouse." When Brecht, from Santa Monica, writes Ruth in New York, "*Wen hast Du getroffen?*" ("Whom have you run into?"), Manheim gives us the sexually charged "Whom have you been seeing?" When Brecht misspells John van Druten as "van Drooten," the editors tacitly correct this and add their own error: "Jan van Druten." When, in the same letter, Brecht mentions Kazan, the notes identify him ludicrously as the "leading film and theatre director . . . Alfred Kazan."

When Brecht, in 1946, supposedly writes his faithful friend and set designer Caspar Neher that "the Nazis carried their tragic fate down with them, which the Parisians are fishing out of the sewer and calling existentialism," he actually writes *Schicksalstragödie*, i.e., tragedy of fatality, a philosophical concept or dramatic form. Brecht's "sexually dependent on him" becomes in the translator's straight English "sexually dependant [*sic*] on to him." For perimeters, we get the ignorant solecism "parameters." E. F. Burian "should have directed" is not the same as "was supposed to direct"; "characters played by actors of like nationality" does not convey clearly "actors of the same nationality as their parts." And Laughton would have been a bad Galileo had he played him "masterfully" instead of, as Brecht writes, "in masterly fashion." And what in the name of syntax and sense is "it's customary for people to wish themselves something on the birthday of our friends"? Willett left to his own devices is no better than Manheim: "mutual friend" he writes, and, for a joint scheme, "Brecht's and Eisler's plan."

But the main problems with Willett's editing are lack of nonspecialist knowledge and a leftism scarcely less pronounced than Brecht's—even if Willett does not remove all of Brecht's warts, which, in any case, would tax the skill of the most masterly dermatologist. Errors of the cultural type: Ferdinand Bruckner's important play *Rassen* mistitled *Die Rassen*, *Rhinoceros* labeled "Ionesco's musical," the great poet Stefan George identified as a mere aesthete and linguist, the director William Dieterle turned into a "producer," "*Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt*" glossed as "'Only the lovelorn/ Know what I suffer'—set by Schubert," instead of more helpfully as "None but the Lonely Heart"—set by Tchaikowsky.

Flaws of the political type are more serious. Thus there is no explanation of the "Trojan horse strategy," Brecht's (and other writers') propaganda tactics; no mention of how Brecht before HUAC played the idiot and, in best Red fashion, lied himself blue in the face. Again, I cannot believe that there is no hidden political agenda in the omission of certain crucial letters showing Brecht in the worst light—the one shed by his human arrogance and political obtuseness. I cite two examples out of many.

There is the letter to a general in the U.S. army of occupation: Brecht protests a failure to answer his request for a permit to visit Berlin. To quote Willett, "Brecht takes the failure to answer as an indication that anti-Nazis are being handicapped because of their 'social opinions.'" Yet, as Brecht declares, "at least 30 divisions of civilian fighters fell in the struggle against Hitler." And "in this continent where you have been sent, writers are not regarded as employees of the entertainment business."

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But in the first place, Brecht was a rabid Communist, not merely an anti-Nazi; in the second, the thirty divisions of civilian casualties were a myth fabricated by (mostly leftist) propaganda, as Brecht must have known by then. In the third place, it was rather cheeky to lecture the American general about the more civilized European attitude toward writers, especially coming from one who, though not in the pay of show business, danced to the stickier tune of Moscow. Fourthly, the brave letter writer never actually mailed this letter. A little of this comes across even in Willett's summary, but it is infinitely more vivid in the full letter as reproduced by Glaeser.

Now for the personal level. The autocratic middle-aged Brecht was relishing his life as East Germany's most celebrated and commensurately privileged artist. It was Communism with the cushiest safety net. His passport was Austrian, his publisher West Germany's best (Suhrkamp), his money in Swiss banks, and the theater handed over to him that lovely Schiffbauerdamm, the scene of his first triumph with *The Threepenny Opera*. He also enjoyed nice living quarters: "The whole place is well-proportioned, it's really a good idea to live in houses and with furniture that are at least 120 years old, let's say, in early capitalist surroundings until later socialist surroundings are available." Thus to Suhrkamp; in a letter to Johannes R. Becher, the writer and Minister of Culture, Brecht thanks him for "unfreezing a beautiful car" for him—a West German BMW. All this and plenty of young actresses from the Berliner Ensemble, too.

For under the indulgent eye of Helene Weigel, Brecht went on having affairs, one of them with Isot Kilian, the attractive wife of the philosopher and Brecht booster Wolfgang Harich, whom Brecht told about his spouse: "Divorce her now. You can marry her again in about two years." So here he is writing to Isot (not reprinted in this volume): "I miss you occasionally, for example in the fight for Bavarian beer, for which I want an import permit, etc." That "etc." presumably refers to egg in his beer.

A Bavarian car, Bavarian beer, and a Bavarian youth. Brecht was born in 1898 in the charming Bavarian town of Augsburg, whose accent he was never able to shed. The first section of the letters covers the Bavarian years in Augsburg and Munich, where he studied (or pretended to study—he never attended classes) medicine to keep himself out of combat in World War I. These letters by the budding Brecht, where ego-inflation can be excused by youth and is largely eclipsed by playfulness, are by far the most human part of the book. Already at sixteen, Brecht writes his chum Caspar Neher, "To combine fidelity to nature with idealism—that is art. . . . Your subject matter needn't be distinguished by outward beauty. . . . What matters is the mind *of the artist*, who transfigures the object, permeates it with his being." Three years later, again to Neher, he is more belligerent but also wittier: "There won't be any art until the last theatregoer hangs himself with the bowels of the last actor." That's making it new with a vengeance.

He describes the songs he is composing for guitar as "characterized by great emotional depth and unwholesome crudeness." Expressionism disgusts Brecht. He's scared stiff of having knocked up his girl friend Paula; she does give birth to a child, Frank, whom Brecht will neglect and who'll die on the Russian front. He often signs his letters to Paula "Bert Brecht." (Later, when married to Helene Weigel, he will call her "Weigel"; she him, "Brecht.") About his latest ballad, he writes Paula patronizingly, "It's so romantic you wouldn't understand it."

Brecht's letters to Neher are much more ardent than those to Paula. To him he writes "beloved," "dearest," and "I kiss you carefully." To the ladies, even the ones who weren't mere casual bedmates, he is only playfully erotic (the editors should have included the letters to Dora Mannheim); whereas to "Cas" Neher he is romantic the way German youths used to wax dangerously sentimental over one another. One of Brecht's pet names for Paula is the masculine "Paul"; to Neher, Brecht writes, "It's better with a friend than with a girl." Years later, Frederic Prokosch

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and Klaus Mann, both homosexuals, asked him whether he had ever been "a homoerotic." As Prokosch, an unreliable witness, tells it, Brecht's answer was, "Never in the flesh, but my mind runs riot occasionally."

The years with Paula—and Rosa Marie and Dora and Hedda and, eventually, Marianne Zoff, whom he was to marry (but in whose lover, Recht, he was almost more interested than in her)—were the time of Brecht's first dramatic successes. The hero of *Baal* is Brecht himself as an amoral superman, self-indulgent, brutal, lecherous, even with (as he put it to Prokosch) "a touch of the homoerotic." The letters mirror this Baalian ferocity. To his fellow playwright Arnolt Bronnen, Brecht dispenses advice on how to get rid of a family whose apartment Brecht wanted for himself and Bronnen: "Throw those Servaes bedbugs out of those rooms bodily. Raze them to the ground, besiege them, spit in their coffee, shut off their heating, bore holes in their shoes, provoke them, spit at them." This from a man who was the greatest of physical cowards while urging others to fight his wars.

And here is his advice to Bronnen on playwriting: "Serve up . . . rich new material in [a] more sinister and carnal envelope." With Lion Feuchtwanger, his collaborator in the adaptation of Marlowe's *Edward II* (a homosexual play), he fights about how much credit should be given Feuchtwanger. The friendly critic Herbert Jhering has to arbitrate and work out the exact billing. And already he is voicing his perennial dissatisfaction with most performers: "These people have no basic feeling for the theatre. . . . The fantastic, incredible fact [of making theatre] is lost to this generation, which has invented the dilettante as functionary." And the displeasure with the bourgeoisie is beginning to take violent shape.

But nowhere in these letters does the young man with dirty collars and fingernails (which fascinated girls no less than his conversation and wooing) describe himself as tellingly as he does in a passage of the *Tagebücher* (Journals) of that period. I translate:

> As I gorged myself on cherries before the mirror today, I saw my idiotic face. Seen against the self-contained black spheres that vanished into my mouth, it seemed even more uncoördinated, lewd, self-contradictory. It has many elements of brutality, stillness, flabbiness, audacity, and cowardice, but only as elements, and it is more changeable and characterless than a landscape under driving clouds. That's why many people can't remember my face ("You've got too many," Hedda says).

Meanwhile Brecht writes the early version of *Drums in the Night* and starts in on the future *In the Jungle of Cities*. His mother dies and, though their relationship was ambiguous, he has guilt feelings; he dislikes his brother and businessman father. Brecht is active in the theatrical life of Munich, but as of 1922 is living in Berlin. He marries Marianne Zoff, and by 1923 has a daughter by her: the future actress Hanne Hiob. But he dedicates *Jungle* to Paula, the mother of his boy, Frank. Herbert Jhering, a powerful Marxist, is instrumental in getting Brecht the prestigious Kleist Prize. He meets the actress Helene Weigel and, by the fall of 1924, has a child by her, too: Stefan. *Edward II*, *Baal*, *Drums in the Night* are produced. He starts a sexually and artistically fruitful affair with his collaborator on many plays, the partly American Elisabeth Hauptmann.

Out of these turbulent, productive, polygynous Berlin years come multifaceted but uninvolving letters. Brecht reads Frank Norris and, in 1926, discovers Karl Marx. He becomes an assistant to the great leftist director Erwin Piscator, the actual father of many of Brecht's ideas about epic theater. We get a number of letters to Helene Weigel, the future second Mrs. Brecht, some of them written while Bertolt is in Capri with his first wife. Does he genuinely dislike Capri that much, even with Neher joining him and Marianne, or is he being falsely reassuring to Weigel? "It's good for the lungs here, but the landscape and inhabitants make you throw up." He is bantering and reassuring: Weigel is not to worry about Marianne or get involved with another man: "*Don't* be silly. No rea-

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son!!!" Incidentally, although both Marianne and Weigel were Jewish, Brecht never had a good word or kind deed for the Jews.

From a 1926 trip to Paris, he writes: "There is nothing to save in the present-day theater and the relatively better it functions the more absolutely it must be combated." The hatred for everything middle-class—art, life, morality—and the conversion to Marxism strike me as, in part, a revulsion from his father and also as a fear of what he himself might turn into if his Baalian impulses went unchecked. Again he writes that "the older theater . . . should be abolished." He wants to make Piscator's theater less literary and more political, urges the creation of a "Red Club" and a "Red Club Theater." Whenever he feels "idle and orphaned," the by now divorced Brecht writes the absent Weigel, he turns to composing "pornographic sonnets." (Some of these have been printed, some not.) His first poetry volume and the plays *In the Jungle of Cities* and *Man Equals Man* are published. To Piscator, he indulges in autocriticism of one of his poems: "It's pretty, it's touching, the theme is objectively sound [!], but . . . there's not an ounce of revolutionary feeling in it, in fact it's very much like those wretched working-class songs that cry out for pity (whose?)." Pity, like the old theater, is to be extirpated. Like so much of Brecht's writing, that poem works *in spite of* its author.

"I am probably more aware than most people of the constant flux of things and the incredible speed with which thoughts and feelings grow old," he writes. The intelligent man develops doubts about an idea by the time "he has uttered the last word of his sentence." This certainly characterizes Brecht, at any rate, who, throughout his life, rewrote more than he wrote. Even his name, originally Berthold, kept changing from Bert to Bertolt and back. But whereas writing is an art, constant rewriting is a nuisance. Reading a Brecht text can be like watching a three-ring circus, with always the nagging fear that one is concentrating on the wrong ring—or version of the text.

We learn in rapid succession that Brecht does not object to emptiness in poetry as long as it does not constitute "originality for its own sake"; that he is not above lying to a correspondent if it suits his interest; that he is against all proletarian culture if it isn't Marxist; and that, as he writes his lifelong friend, the Marxist novelist Alfred Döblin, he fears that his "poetry is the most telling argument against his plays," because his verse lacks the same political effect. In this, he may well have anticipated the current perception that, however good his drama, his poems are better. He delays sending the *Threepenny Opera* songs to Karl Klammer ("K. L. Amer"), the translator of Villon, because (as he doesn't say) he has used Klammer's translations, only slightly modified, in his musical. (Later, he had to pay Klammer a small royalty.) And in a letter to his wife, he lies about Margarete Steffin, a minor actress and major proletarian and Marxist, who has become one of his most important collaborators and mistresses: "Dear Helli, you mustn't make a big thing of this. I can't bear to let myself be influenced by gossip or having to make allowances for the fantasies of a few old maids. But I am as fond of you as ever."

There are notable letters to Bernard von Brentano, Georg Lukács, Sergei Tretiakoff in Russia, Walter Benjamin, and others, in which the future of Communism and Marxist literature are discussed with Brecht defending the Soviets and (later) Stalinism against the charges of socialists and fellow Communists. He is concerned with language and congratulates Karl Kraus on having laid bare the "frightful devastations . . . caused by language. . . . For you grammar has become a branch of ethics, and you have convicted criminals by using their language as evidence." Late in 1933 he writes Tretiakoff, a playwright and documentarist, "The time for spectacular proclamations, protests, etc. is over for the moment. What is needed now is patient, persistent, painstaking educational work as well as study." By this time, Brecht and his family (Helene and little Stefan and Barbara) are living in exile from the Nazis at

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picturesque Skovsbostrand near Svendborg in Denmark.

It is in Svendborg that Brecht the writer, ideologue, political strategist—and even epistolarian—comes into his own. Politically, the most interesting letters are to Karl Korsch, a philosopher, politician, and maverick Marxist, whose classes and discussion groups Brecht had attended, and whom he kept thinking of as his "Professor," even though they disagreed about Stalin. We learn from Willett how, on a visit to the U.S.S.R., Brecht got the idea for his "alienation effect" from watching the Chinese actor and female impersonator Mei Lan-fang. Brecht knew, perhaps from his interest in Shakespeare, that what mattered was not where you got your ideas, but what you did with them.

"Thinking people," he tells Korsch, "tend to become impatient at the failure of any repeatedly and exhaustively tried method, and to want to discard it entirely; such impatience is dangerous." This from the supreme believer in changing and discarding! But it is from self-contradictions and paradoxes that Brecht's art profited most. So this man who was anything but your typical aesthete gets into a heated argument with his Dutch publisher who was bringing out his *Threepenny Novel* in German: "Even for a German reader it's not so easy to follow the very small print in the relatively wide lines [an admonishment the present publisher might have pondered!]. . . . The page as a whole looks good. But the print is *very* small and the bold type gives it a heavy look, which detracts from the unassuming character of the story." His protests were unavailing.

For those who wish to know how charming Brecht could be—especially to women—there is a letter to Princess Bibesco about how he was denied entrance by the doorman of the Savoy. Soon thereafter, in a 1935 letter to Brentano, we find Brecht the strategist and propagandist at full tilt. That Stalin likes "to hear himself called 'the great' does not make him small. . . . Even if you think I am wrong about all this—even then there is one fact that ought to take the ground from under your feet. Your fight against a bad form of state becomes a fight against the highest form of state thus far evolved." This is Brecht's central argument, and, to forestall a riposte, "Action requires the ability to handle contradictions." To Mikhail Koltsov, the journalist, magazine publisher, and Writers' Union official, he confides after a "refreshing" trip to the Soviet Union that a writer would "have no objection to the end of the world if he could be sure his book about it could still manage to appear." I hope Koltsov could handle this contradiction.

"People are anything but helpful, noble, and good" writes the friend of the people to Döblin. "As a rule they're lacking in common decency." But Brecht was a True Communist in letting an American writer take considerable liberties with his stage adaptation of Gorky's *The Mother*, whose mounting by the Communist-led Theatre Union brought Brecht to America for the first time. Once in New York, he and Hanns Eisler, his composer, quickly made themselves *personae non gratae*. Not only did Brecht keep interfering with the staging, but also, as Albert Maltz noted, "the stench of his unwashed body made it an ordeal to sit beside him." To Weigel, Brecht wrote from New York, "Your Jewish descent is a big help," and started nudging her to learn English (a leitmotif in the letters), something he himself never quite managed. Again, he tells her that, despite the fifteen-cent movies, New York is "more boring than Skovsbostrand." The American theater, he writes Lee Strasberg, must be saved from the "bourgeois drug traffic and emotions racket." He picked the wrong guy to say that to.

From London he reports that there is no theater. But tricks can be learned from the capitalist society, such as exploiting the star system. He is reluctant to send a finished play off to a publisher: he wants to keep tinkering with it for another week. He defends the Soviet show trials. Approaching a literary work from an aesthetic point of view is "undoubtedly a Satanic temptation." He warns his wife (another leitmotif) not to "lose *too* much weight, especially you know

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where." She is not to smoke too much, either, though he himself is always haloed by his Havana cigar smoke.

Most horribly, he writes Feuchtwanger in 1937 about Carola Neher. The lovely actress had been his Polly Peachum and his mistress, but in the Soviet Union, whither she emigrated, she ran into trouble as a Trotskyite. Perhaps Feuchtwanger should send a telegram in her defense. But "if she has been convicted, I'm sure it hasn't been without ample evidence." Couldn't she just be expelled? Actually, Neher spent years in jail and was then executed. Brecht did no more for her than for his friends Tretiakoff and Koltsov when *they* were put to death. He writes Korsch: "Since Tretiakoff was arrested (as a Japanese spy, I believe)," without the least indignation, though surely aware of the preposterousness of it. He is wittily unconvinced by those who say Hitler's takeover of Austria merely "increased the number of his enemies. . . . It should follow that if he conquered the whole world he'd have to hang himself." He is courageous—for others; when Hitler invades Czechoslovakia, he wires President Beneš: "Fight and those who are vacillating will close ranks with you." Mistakenly, he believes in the "fragility" of the Nazi war machine. He writes his friend Reyher in Hollywood that, to make *Galileo* acceptable to the movies, "the problem of treating the Church in a way that won't give offense would not be very hard to solve." Soon he would be grappling with Hollywood *mano a mano*.

Denmark seems no longer safe. Sweden is the next stop, whence he writes concerning poor payment from a Soviet magazine for his literary contributions, "I can't believe that if properly informed any government department in the Soviet Union would behave like this. . . . " Finland is next; he is trying to work his way to America. He is worried that there won't be a U.S. visa for his beloved Margarete Steffin, who is, moreover, suffering from TB. At long last he is able to set out for America with his wife, two children, and two mistress-collaborators: the German Steffin and the Danish Ruth Berlau. In Moscow, he must heavy-heartedly abandon the gravely ill Margarete; he is shattered when news of her death reaches him on the Trans-Siberian Express. From Vladivostok, Brecht catches the last boat to the U.S.A., though with only one mistress now. Piscator has arranged for him to teach at the New School in New York.

But, as fate would have it, the boat lands in San Pedro, and it's in the Los Angeles area that the Brechts will settle. Bertolt writes Korsch from his new home in Santa Monica: "Even in the backwoods of Finland I never felt so out of the world as here." Proposing to Piscator at the New School, where he still hopes to be hired, an adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida*, he pronounces Thersites "one of the most lovable characters in world literature." (Brechtian, yes; lovable, no.) He writes a nice letter to a simple Jewish tailor who saw him wearing shabby clothes and sent him his own wedding suit. He asks Ruth, who now lives in New York, to procure him the best Havana cigars, which she does. He cheers himself up by listening to Lotte Lenya's French records. Though trying to make his living as a screenwriter, he will get the basics wrong, referring to "Universum Pictures." But, then, he *is* sloppy; in a later letter, for instance, he spells Büchner's masterpiece "*Wozzek*."

He complains about Hollywood's ugly "lie traffic," which "pervades everything." In New York, the hysterical Ruth makes trouble for him, as she will for the rest of his life. He is now wheeling and dealing, playing off one translator, producer, director, or actor against another. (The details of these machinations can best be gleaned from James K. Lyon's *Bertolt Brecht in America*.) He tells Ruth that when writing about his works or projects "you're as friendly and wise and as close to me as if you were wearing the long white thing"—a sexy garment with which she aroused him during his stay with her in New York. The collaborator is always at least as important to him as the lover.

He writes the gifted refugee director Berthold Viertel that "it's not true that once the Nazi cancer is removed, the healthy, val-

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uable, 'authentic' German will be restored to life . . . . The only way of suppressing Nazism is to suppress the German bourgeoisie," even if the proletariat ends up paying for it. To Ruth he writes: "Please take all these dry-as-dust lines as lines of love." Late in 1945 he informs Suhrkamp that all his longer plays "need changes." He writes Elisabeth Hauptmann, who also spent the war years in the U.S., "It must be definitely brought out that I am a realist and nothing else"—is his eye again on the Soviets for their approval? And, as he tells Eric Bentley, he writes parables, not symbolism, even though the "doctrinaire" in his drama does not overshadow the "entertaining." It's just that "classes whose interests are under attack seldom feel entertained."

The American theater ("the whole continent has only one single street with theatres on it, Broadway") is pure "cold-blooded merchandising . . . a branch of the narcotics trade operated by gamblers." In a letter to Steffin's mother, he blames Margarete's premature death not on TB, but on the struggle against the bourgeoisie. He spends his last weeks in Santa Monica translating the revised *Galileo* back into German, but finds it hard to recall that quality of Teutonic twilight "my poor country is so fond of."

Back in Europe, Brecht first settles in Zurich: "One must have a place to live outside Germany." He writes Eisler that he wasn't arrogant before HUAC, as some newspapers claim, but simply obeyed his six lawyers and told "the truth and *nothing* else." Ha! He is confident that, although *Galileo* flopped in New York, "serious drama in the States will [never] be the same again." To the Swiss playwright-novelist Max Frisch, Brecht writes that postwar society does "not—any more than burglars—like to see arguments driven home with a club. But the history of great drama shows that in aesthetic productions a club is a legitimate instrument." Eventually the Brechts (Bertolt, Helene, Barbara—Stefan elected to remain in the States) are back in East Berlin, where "living conditions . . . are not at all bad for artists." True enough—if they were internationally famous and toed the line. Barbara has an illness, the exact nature of which is deleted from both the German and English editions of the letters. She was pregnant but unmarried, which enraged Brecht, forgetful of his own youth.

He encourages Piscator to return to East Berlin: "I myself have never made any official statements." He proposes a production of Büchner's *Danton's Death*, rewritten by himself, in which Danton behaves like a prima donna and is punished for it. Luckily for Brecht, this never came to pass. But he does make changes in his radio cantata *Lindbergh's Flight*, altering the title to *The Ocean Flight* and expunging the name of Lindbergh, who had been a Nazi sympathizer.

Brecht does not go backstage to congratulate the great actor Fritz Kortner on his performance in Strindberg's *The Father*, because what the play says "does not strike me as being worth formulating." Instead, he invites Kortner to play his Galileo, which Kortner refuses; nor does he later accept invitations to join Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. There, with Brecht as director and Weigel as leading lady, Brecht's plays are performed with fanatical pedantry, whereas other authors', say Hauptmann's, are rewritten to fit the East German agenda. Brecht claims that trying to run a new theater leaves him no time to write for it. Considering his late efforts, just as well.

He did, however, have his run-ins with the authorities. The opera he had written with Paul Dessau, *The Trial of Lucullus*, was about to be denied a performance permit. In it, Brecht had already rewritten history and made the democratic Lucullus a capitalist swine; now he was rewriting future history by claiming timeliness for the opera because West German generals were allegedly preparing another world war. He altered the title to *The Condemnation of Lucullus* and, along with Dessau, made other conciliatory changes. He wrote numerous crawling letters, kissing the hands that forced him to revise and revise. Meanwhile he negotiated with West Germany for performance rights to the original version.

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Though the Berliner Ensemble did good work with Brecht plays—and little else of value—he had to toady to the commissars and lie to the world. His letter to Premier Grotewohl after the events of June 17, 1953, offering the services of the Berliner Ensemble to back him up in a political broadcast, and his letter to Suhrkamp justifying the repression of the workers with lies about Western warmongers, make for depressing reading. When Khrushchev made his revelations about Stalin, Brecht still refused to speak up: the exposure of Stalin's crimes, he told his protégé, the young playwright Peter Hacks, would be the task of the next generation of dramatists. (Not Hacks's, to be sure; he savored his East Berlin privileges too much to take such risks.)

Brecht is eager for his works to be preserved by collectors in the West, including hated America, worried as he is about their destruction by nuclear warfare. He continues having affairs with his young actresses, though there is, as Willett puts it, nothing about it "in his published correspondence," leaving us to wonder about the unpublished. But it is a different kind of heart problem that begins to beset him and will eventually kill him. Meanwhile he keeps playing up to the likes of Becher, writing him disingenuously about "the great poetic work you threw into the breach against Hitler's offensive of 1941" —as if bad poetry, or even good, could stop a single tank or dive bomber. He manages to win the Stalin Prize in the nick of time (1955) and sends his thanks: "I believe it the highest and most desirable of all prizes awarded today."

He is a good, nepotistic father to Hanne Hiob, pulling strings to get her leads in his plays in West Germany. He tries to get Okhlopkov, the great Russian actor-director, to arrange for the Berliner Ensemble to appear in the Soviet Union. He puts Ruth Berlau in her place about her share in the creation of *Puntila*: "infinitesimal, less than one per cent." His ego is such that he enjoys Giorgio Strehler's Milan production of *The Threepenny Opera*, which runs from 9:30 P.M. to 2:00 A.M. As he prepares to go to a sanatorium in Munich, East German doctors having failed to diagnose his heart condition early enough, he dies of a heart attack on August 14, 1956. In his last letter (August 13), he plays up to his East German physician: "None of the gains brought about by your treatment has been lost, but there has been no recovery." And he announces his departure for a clinic in Munich. His journey was to be a longer one.

Letters such as these are written by the man, not by the artist. In them, by and large, Brecht flunks as a human being. Yet Max Frisch, who knew him, captures something essential in a tribute from which I translate:

> He appears like . . . a man without a country, a man with limited sojourns, a transient in our time. . . . He had that prisoner's face: the small round eyes somewhere in the flat countenance, birdlike on a too naked neck. Yet he could be very cheerful. A frightening face: perhaps repellent if you didn't already know him. . . . A camp inmate with a cigar. You felt like giving him a thick muffler. His mouth almost lipless. He was clean but unshaven; no bum, no Villon. Only gray. His haircut looked like a precaution against infestation by lice or like a violation inflicted on him. His walk—a case of missing shoulders. . . . He walked fast, but the arms did not join in. And that gray farmer's jacket, as if he had been outfitted with supplies from an institution; only the bunch of pencils, which he always carried in his breast pocket, was private property, and the obligatory cigar. Otherwise, he didn't know whereto with his hands and would shove them, like something denuded, flat into his coat pockets.

There is something pitiful about this Brecht, but, then, it was the man just out of America and not yet admitted to Germany, a transient in Switzerland. Not at all the powerful figure he was to become. But under the arrogance one can imagine this feeling of perpetual transience even in East Berlin. Perhaps, from time to time, he even doubted the God he had picked for himself. Only he wasn't one to admit to having been wrong about anything.

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Rehearing yesterday's violinists

by Samuel Lipman

Perhaps the chief unintended benefit to music lovers of the CD revolution has been the recent profusion of discs containing excellent digital transfers of pre-1950 78 RPM recordings. The first beneficiary of these new-old CDs was the extraordinary vocalism of the great age of singing in the first thirty years of our century.[1] Now, it seems to be the turn of the great violinists of the recorded past.[2] English specialty labels, as always alert to the glories to be found on 78s, are currently making available samples of the playing of worthy violinists, all of whom were famous in their day and remain somewhat familiar in the present; many more of the violinists newly available on CD seem destined to remain nothing more than names in old musical encyclopedias.

Such, at least, must be the verdict on perhaps the most ambitious set of CD reissues of old violin recordings yet released. Assembled by Pearl, the well-known reissuer of 78 RPM originals, these six CDs[3] contain the playing of no fewer than ninety-five violinists. These artists range in time from Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), who as a child came under the personal tutelage of Mendelssohn, to Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987), who was more responsible than any other individual for the state of violin playing today. On these discs are all the other fabled violinists, artists such as Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), Jacques Thibaud (1880-1953), Bronislaw Huberman (1882-1947), Efrem Zimbalist (1889-1985), Mischa Elman (1891-1967), Zino Francescatti (b. 1902), Nathan Milstein (b. 1904), and David Oistrakh (1908-1974). The only major figure missing from this galaxy is Yehudi Menuhin (b. 1916); it seems that Menuhin, for whatever reason, refused to allow his playing to be included. There are even performances on these CDs by Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908) and Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931), two late-nineteenth-century composer-virtuosos who both formed early-twentieth-century playing styles and added display pieces to the violin repertory. The remaining bevy of violinists, all less known, on the Pearl sets includes several artists of large-scale musical personality or of commanding technical achievement; Arnold Rosé (1863-1946), concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, a marvelous chamber-music player, and Gustav Mahler's brother-in-law, is here an exemplar of a pure musical personality, while Mishel Piastro (1891-1970), concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic in the 1930s and later conductor of the Longines Symphonette, an immensely popular radio orchestra, is an ex-

1 See "Refurbishing Caruso and Company," my article about these performances as transferred by the particularly attractive Nimbus process, in the February 1990 issue of *The New Criterion*.

2 It should be mentioned here that the necessary companion for anyone interested in the violin's recorded past is the Canadian James Creighton's *Discopaedia of the Violin, 1889-1971*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1974.

3 Pearl CD BVA I and BVA II.

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emplar of a scarcely believable virtuosity. The Pearl set even has room for a 1938 recording—and a surprisingly able one at that—of Lully by Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1987), the founder of the famous Japanese group violin-teaching method.

All honor to the Pearl collection: it cannot help but serve as a salutary antidote to the idea many concertgoers have that violin playing began with Itzhak Perlman. But a necessary feature of these CDs, given Pearl's proper decision to include as many artists as possible, is that only small installments of each violinist's art are here made available to the listener. This problem is only compounded by the fact that it was not really until the advent of electrical recording in 1925 that musical executants, very much including violinists, began to record longer, musically important works; it is also the case that only after 1925 was it possible to record solo concertos with realistic orchestral backing. And so as one listens to the hundred or so tracks of the Pearl CDs, the listener's all-too-understandable reaction is one of satiety, of a merging and blending of one artist into another. It would be a pity, then, were those interested in violin playing to stop their listening with these discs, for there is vastly more of the highest musical value to be found in the recorded literature of several of the Pearl artists. Particularly, the highest interest attaches to what we can now hear on old records of the playing of three great and influential musicians: Joseph Szigeti (1892-1973), Carl Flesch (1873-1944), and Adolf Busch (1891-1952); it is our good fortune that each of these three left behind recordings in reasonably good sound of the musical cornerstones of the violin repertory.

It was through the playing of Szigeti that I first became aware of *musical* rather than technical violin playing. Curiously, this first awakening about violin playing was provided not by a musician, but by a professor of English. Back in 1954, when I was an undergraduate at the subsequently notorious San Francisco State College, I found myself taking a required literature course from this man, who surely must have been one of the most ferocious—and fabulously over-qualified—academics ever dropped on a streetcar college like San Francisco State. A specialist in eighteenth-century English literature and seventeenth-century English theology, a devout High Church Episcopalian, and a curmudgeon of the first water, he soon found out that I was a pianist. He immediately wanted to check my musical loyalties: Who was my favorite pianist, he demanded to know. I answered Rubinstein, and his ruddy complexion turned still redder in disgust. And who was my favorite violinist, he continued. Cowed, I timidly supplied the for me hitherto sacrosanct name of Heifetz. Now he exploded: "You say that because you don't know anything. You ought to like Szigeti, and when you grow up, you'll know I'm right!"

It is not for me to judge if I've grown up, but I suppose it is for me to judge my professor's musical taste. He was indeed right, and I now find that the Hungarian Szigeti has for me today, through his recordings, a musical presence that the incomparably successful Heifetz cannot match. The CD revolution is just catching up with Szigeti; Pearl has now made available the early Szigeti recordings of the Beethoven and Brahms concertos.[4] Furthermore, two new English CD sets, not widely available in this country, bring us some of Szigeti's marvelous Bach discs from the early 1930s, along with a generous sampling of his pre-World War II electrical recordings of important compositions as well as virtuoso pieces.[5]

There are treasures to be found in these recordings. As it should be, the Bach performances—of the solo sonatas in G minor and A minor—document an approach and an achievement all too out of fashion now: grave, straightforward, and unaffected. Completely absent from Szigeti's Bach is that subtle but mawkish sentimentality, always difficult to separate from technical convenience, so pervasive in what passes today

4 Pearl GEMM CD 9345.

5 Biddulph LAB 005-6 and LAB 0007-8.

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for virtuosity. Everywhere in Szigeti's playing one has the impression that it is Bach that has formed his playing of the more flashy parts of his repertory, and not, as is the case in contemporary musical life, audience-pleasing music that has influenced his idea of Bach. But for Szigeti, gravity and straightforwardness hardly mean musical caution and pale sound. Instead his playing is vital, decisive, and full of rhythmic snap; his tone is prevailingly warm and rich.

As with Szigeti's Bach, so with his Mozart—in this case the Sonata in E minor, K.304, and the Concerto no. 4 in D major, K.218.[6] He does not make the music into something suggestively elegant, a nineteenth-century wolf in eighteenth-century sheep's clothing. Szigeti's essential sturdiness places his Mozart beyond mere historically authentic performance; instead of recreating the music of a bygone time, Szigeti presents a fully living Mozart, a Mozart without the distancing from us the best musical historiography purposefully tries to arrange.

Famous for his Bach, Szigeti was also a Beethoven interpreter of the first rank. The violinist's recorded Beethoven includes the Violin Concerto with Bruno Walter and two piano-and-violin sonatas (the F major, opus 24, and the G major, opus 96) with Artur Schnabel. Szigeti and Walter recorded the Beethoven concerto twice, first with an unidentified (but excellent) English orchestra in 1932, and then again with the New York Philharmonic in the mid-1940s. True Szigeti fans will always return to the earlier performance, on account of its greater urgency and force from both soloist and conductor. Here is not playing of Heifetzian smoothness, but of Szigetian honesty. There are no hesitations at the bar-lines, today's easy simulacrum of musical feeling; there are only inevitable arrivals at the necessary resolutions of melodic and harmonic phrases. It must be added that the concluding Rondo is here taken at a properly articulated tempo, rather than at the Kentucky Derby pace favored by present-day violinists. The orchestral performance, too, is a revelation of Walter's galvanizing élan at this earlier, pre-American, stage in his career.

The Beethoven sonata recordings with Schnabel come from a live performance at New York's Frick Museum in 1948.[7] One could wish that this performance had taken place a decade and more earlier. At the time of the Frick concert Schnabel was just thirteen days short of his sixty-sixth birthday, and was to die in Switzerland only three years later; by the late 1940s Szigeti (who had already been active as a prodigy in the first decade of the century) had begun to lose a good deal of his technical brio, though none of his musical wisdom. In any case, on this occasion the Beethoven sonatas sound autumnal and even gentle, as if the artists have so much to tell us about the music that they must lower their voices to make their art heard.

Szigeti recorded two major Brahms compositions: the Concerto and the Sonata no. 3 in D minor. Like the Beethoven, he recorded the Brahms Concerto twice, the first time in 1928 with Hamilton Harty conducting the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, and then afterward in the 1940s with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. I have not heard the recording with Ormandy. The performance with Harty is to be treasured for its supreme possession of the virtues of Szigeti's best playing: perhaps one word—command—serves to sum these virtues up. As one hears the magnificently confident solo entrance of this 1928 recording, one imagines the violinist's whole body and mind planted solidly on the stage, commanding the instrument, the orchestra, and the music, and addressing the very solid

6 The Mozart concerto, along with the Mendelssohn E minor Concerto and the Prokofiev Concerto no. 1 in D major, have just been made available on CD in England on Pearl GEMM CD 9377. I have not seen the Pearl CD in this country as yet.

7 The Frick performance is to be found on a set of LP transfers of Szigeti's playing, brought together in the early 1970s as a tribute to the violinist on his eightieth birthday (Columbia M6X 31513).

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Brahms as an equal. Once again, as always with Szigeti, this is playing without side and without artifice. The listener should also listen carefully to the songful orchestral playing, and think how little instrumental song there is to be heard these days in the "great performances" we are offered in concert halls, on new recordings, and on television and radio.

The Brahms Sonata recording was made in 1937 with the very under-appreciated pianist Egon Petri (1881-1962) and, fortunately, is included on the new English Szigeti CDs. Petri, whom I knew when I was a teenager and played for several times, was perhaps the most powerful intellect among twentieth-century pianists. A pupil, disciple, and successor of the remarkable pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), Petri collaborated with Busoni upon the imposing complete edition of Bach's keyboard works published in the 1920s by Breitkopf und Härtel in Leipzig. Petri and Szigeti had known each other since 1912, and had given recitals together for many years. It cannot be said that their performance of the Brahms Sonata is in any easy way attractive; for a remarkable example of such attractiveness at its most rewarding, one must go to the gorgeous recording (*c.* 1932) of the piece by Paul Kochanski and Arthur Rubinstein. No, Szigeti and Petri don't try very hard to be attractive, but they are keen to lay out the shape of the music in the way few performers have ever done. Furthermore, Szigeti's large, pure, and thoroughly unsentimental tone in the affecting slow movement, supported by Petri's alert sense of pulse and rhythm, proves that it is possible to play a beautiful melody beautifully without saccharine, and even without sugar.

There is much more on all these Szigeti recordings than can be described seriatim here. Szigeti was an avid performer of what was for him during his lifetime contemporary music. He made many recordings of Bartók's compositions with the composer at the piano. A famous, albeit somewhat disappointing, 1940 recording of *Contrasts* with Bartók, Szigeti, and clarinetist Benny Goodman is currently available on CD;[8] earlier and more vibrant recordings of other works can be found on the English CDs, and still others as yet can only be found on the complete Hungarian edition of Bartók's piano playing.[9] A CD set is now available of a 1940 Szigeti-Bartók recital at the Library of Congress;[10] this program included the Beethoven Sonata in A major, opus 47 (the "Kreutzer"), the Debussy Sonata, and the Bartók Sonata no. 2 and the Rhapsody no. 1. On this program, the Beethoven was the star, with Szigeti's and Bartók's playing totally strong and exciting. Also worthy of high praise is Szigeti's glorious 1939 recording of the Ernest Bloch Violin Concerto,[11] completed the previous year on Szigeti's commission, with Charles Munch conducting the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra.

Szigeti, of course, was a famous soloist, teaching little but traveling annually all over the world and possessing the kind of public stature that is the reward of the most successful performing artists. By contrast, his Hungarian colleague Carl Flesch was primarily a teacher, whose public appearances seemed to complement rather than efface his teaching. By the turn of the century, he was teaching at the Amsterdam Conservatory, and from 1921 until Hitler he taught the violin at the Berlin Hochschule; from 1924 to 1928, he taught at the then-new Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. His students included Henryk Szeryng, Szymon Goldberg, Ida Haendel, Henri Temianka, and the extraordinarily gifted but tragically short-lived Josef Hassid (1923-1945).[12] In 1923, making sure that his work as a teacher would be passed on to the future, Flesch published perhaps the most important treatise on violin

8 CBS CD MK-42227.

9 Hungaroton LPX 12326-33.

10 Vanguard VCD-72025.

11 Music & Arts CD-270.

12 Hassid's playing is to be found on an EMI LP, HMV Treasury EH 29 12301. For a discussion of the Hassid marvels, see my essay "The Violinist of the Age" in the October 1987 *New Criterion*.

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playing of the century, and made additions to it several years later.[13]

Flesch was also an excellent if spiky and contentious memoirist. At his death, he left an almost complete book of recollections, completed by his son.[14] Szigeti too had written his memoirs, but in his case he chose to present his life as a predictable series of peripatetic triumphs.[15] By contrast, Flesch's memoirs make clear the uncompromising nature of his musical positions, and of his plain-spoken (and often hardly flattering) opinions about his famous colleagues. In this regard, Flesch's remarks about Schnabel's compositions deserve quotation, and the reader must bear in mind that Flesch was writing about a close associate:

> ... Schnabel had dedicated his Sonata for unaccompanied violin to me. It is an interesting monstrosity, which takes nearly an hour to play, and offers a sample card of all the contradictions in the composer's personality. Its accumulations of minor seconds, augmented sevenths and diminished tenths produced such an irritating effect on my nerves that in the middle of studying it I had a nervous breakdown which manifested itself, above all, in acute insomnia and drove me away from my summer holiday.

Until the end of World War I, Flesch played chamber music with Schnabel, and then later with the Clara Schumann pupil Carl Friedberg (1872-1955). Sadly enough, there is no recorded evidence of these collaborations. Flesch did make a number of acoustic and early electric 78 RPM discs, all of short pieces and mostly, though not entirely, of the kind of encore pieces every violinist quickly learns that audiences demand as their price for sitting still during great music. Flesch's eminently weighty 1937 HMV recording of the Bach Double Concerto in D minor (BWV 1043), in which his partner was Szigeti, has long been respected by musically sophisticated violin connoisseurs.[16] For some years now, there have been well-substantiated rumors that private recordings existed of Flesch's mid-1930s radio broadcasts, conductors and orchestras unknown, of the Beethoven and Brahms concertos. A recent English CD set,[17] fitfully available in this country, happily turns these rumors into fact.

And what beautiful facts these Flesch concerto performances are! To all the manifold musical honesty of the 1932 Szigeti-Walter recording of the Beethoven, Flesch—superbly matched by the unfortunately unidentified conductor and orchestra—adds an ineffably *golden* quality. This bright and shining luster parallels and makes manifest Beethoven's personal synthesis of a Gluck-derived classicism and his own impetuous romanticism. There is little point in trying to describe further what Flesch finds here to show us about Beethoven: the critic's craft inevitably pales before the musician's art. Fortunately, the acetate discs on which the Flesch Beethoven performance was preserved seem to have been kept in remarkably good condition, and the recorded sound is quite acceptable.

Wonderful though Flesch's Brahms Concerto performance is, the impression is unavoidably reduced by the presence of several gaps in the recording, including the opening 110 bars of the first movement. Still, the listener knows instantly that in Flesch's playing of this immortal music one hears a kind of profound knowledge of the work, as if the performer, without in any way committing an act of supererogation, has himself become the composer. And as in the Beethoven, one is stunned by the golden aura of the music as it emerges from Flesch's hands.

There is another great violinist-musician who more than deserves mention along with

13 Flesch's *The Art of Violin Playing* appeared in English translation in 1924; a second edition appeared in 1930.

14 *The Memoirs of Carl Flesch* was published by Rockliff (London) in 1957 and reprinted by Da Capo in 1979.

15 *With Strings Attached*, by Joseph Szigeti, was first published in 1947; a second edition, bringing the story forward, was published in 1967.

16 The Bach Double Concerto was to be found in a 1960s LP transfer on EMI HQM 1127.

17 Symposium 1032/3/4.

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Szigeti and Flesch: Adolf Busch seemed during his lifetime, and seems to this day, such an extraordinarily profound artist that he almost transcended the instrument he played. Busch was the brother of the great Mozart conductor Fritz Busch, whose mid-1930s Glyndebourne Festival recordings (now available on CD) of *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni*, and *The Marriage of Figaro* remain touchstones to this day. He was also the father-in-law of pianist Rudolf Serkin, with whom he was associated in two decades of frequent chamber-music performances, and with whom in 1951 he founded the Marlboro Music School and Festival, one of the most artistically influential ventures in the history of American musical life.

Perhaps even more than Szigeti, and equally with Flesch, Busch was never a violinist's violinist; he was always a musician's violinist. His recording career began around the end of World War I. The Pearl CD set contains two marvelous Busch performances from this period: a soulfully played slow piece by Corelli, strangely evocative of the Intermezzo from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*; and a striding performance, with athletic arpeggio playing, of the Kreisler "Praeludium" in the style of Pugnani.

By 1929, Busch was recording the Bach D minor solo Sonata, which includes the famous "Chaconne" once so beloved in orchestral and piano transcriptions, for HMV.[18] His angular performance, with each note disjunct, of this central work of Western music seems a kind of sermon in itself, a threefold exposition first of the holy word of Bach, then of the integrity of the German performance tradition, and finally of the proper musical use of the violin. The listener is conscious not of the vibrancy of Szigeti, or of the golden aura associated with Flesch, but of Busch's severity as a taskmaster. Busch meant the Bach he played to be taken as good—good for him, good for the listener, and good for the world.

Throughout the 1930s, Busch recorded some of the greatest works of Beethoven and Schubert with Serkin, and with his own string quartet. This cycle of important recordings began in 1931 with the Schubert violin-and-piano Fantasy, continued the next year with the Beethoven sonatas in F major, opus 24 ("Spring"), and in C minor, opus 30, no. 2, and the Beethoven Quartet in F minor, opus 95. In 1933, the Busch Quartet recorded three more Beethoven quartets, the F major, opus 18, no. 1, the C major, opus 59, no. 3, and the F major, opus 135. In 1935, Busch recorded, with his cellist-brother Hermann and Serkin, the Schubert Trio in E flat major, opus 100, and the next year the Busch Quartet brought out the Schubert Quartet in D minor ("Death and the Maiden") and the Beethoven Quartet in C sharp minor, opus 131. The Beethoven quartets in E flat major, opus 127, in A minor, opus 132, and in B flat major, opus 130, were put on discs in 1936-37, 1937, and 1941, respectively; the Schubert Quartet in G major, opus 161, was recorded in 1938.[19] At the time of their first appearance, these recordings—along with the Schnabel Beethoven Sonatas and the Fritz Busch Glyndebourne Mozart operas—finally staked out the phonographic territory for the greatest music, presented in full depth. Here was the final answer to the complaint, made since the beginning of classical-music recording at the turn of the century, that the phonograph was limited, by reasons of technology and audience, to short works of wide appeal. The Busch performances of this chamber-music repertory still impress the listener as profoundly high-minded and deeply insightful, and the depth of their comprehension of the music can never be in doubt. Unfortunately,

18 Now available on CD, along with the opus 24 and opus 30, no. 2, Beethoven sonatas mentioned below, on Angel CD CDM 7 63494 2.

19 Little of this material has as yet made its way to CDs. All the Busch Beethoven quartets, with the exception of the opus 130, were available some years ago on LP as EMI EX 137 29 0306 3; the opus 130 was on CBS Sony LP (Japan) 20AC 1804. The Schubert quartets (along with the Fantasy and the opus 100 Trio) were available on EMI EX 137 29 0950 3; a CD containing the "Death and the Maiden" and the G major string quartet is available on Angel CDH 7-69795 2.

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the Busch Quartet sometimes seemed technically awkward on these recordings, and the group's standing would doubtless be higher today were it not for the existence of the musically rich and virtuoso later recordings of this material, made in the early 1950s, by the Budapest Quartet and, especially, by the Hollywood Quartet.[20]

No such caveats apply to the vastly important sets of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos and the Orchestral Suites that Busch, by now a refugee (like his brothers, by his own choice) from Nazi Germany, made in London in 1936 with his own chamber orchestra.[21] I suppose these are not in any sense "authentic" renditions. They use modern instruments, early-twentieth-century romantic playing styles, and the best available nineteenth-century texts. They do not claim to be anything more than the distillation of one performer's lifetime of experience playing Bach. In this case, the authenticity comes from what might be called personal testimony, not from scholarly research. These are performances that manage at the same time to present both weight and warmth, and in so doing once again manage to present the music (as I have said Szigeti had done in his Mozart playing) as beyond the contingencies of historical time. In Busch's hands, this is music to be listened to for solace and succor; my own favorite example of this heart-warming aspect of Busch's orchestral Bach is the opening of the Suite no. 3 in D major, surely in itself one of the most deeply moving passages in our musical heritage. Where in this passage contemporary performers find only jerkiness and *braggadoccio*, Busch finds stateliness and nobility; where today this passage seems all rhythm, in Busch's direction the passage becomes all melody.

There are many estimable Busch recordings from the 1940s, in which he serves as violinist-conductor; a goodly number of these are of Bach, and they still give much pleasure. But of all his recorded activities in the decade before his death, one above all demands mention here: the 1942 disc, taken from a Sunday New York Philharmonic radio broadcast, of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, with Fritz Busch on the podium.[22] This magisterial performance exudes orchestral strength and soloistic authority. There is something Toscaninian about the virility of this performance, though without anything of Toscanini's Italianate electricity. Here is playing fully worthy of ranking with the Szigeti and Flesch recordings; here is yet another manifestation of the high school of Beethoven playing that flourished in Europe (and by extension in the United States as well) in the three or so decades following the end of World War I. Let those who want perfect accuracy and efficiency look elsewhere; what is to be found coming from Adolf Busch and his brother is a soaring conception of Beethoven as giant, and of music as fully occupying our minds and our lives.

Perhaps it is this last idea, of music fully occupying our minds and our lives, that seems to sum up the achievements of Joseph Szigeti, Carl Flesch, and Adolf Busch. We may doubt whether classical music will ever again occupy this position in our cultural world and in ourselves; meanwhile, all these incredible violin recordings can document for us a time when great music seemed enough in itself to make life worth living.

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20 Neither the Budapest nor the Hollywood performances are to be found on CD. The Budapest records were widely available until a few years ago on the Columbia Odyssey label. The Hollywood records (including all the late Beethoven quartets) were reissued on LP by EMI in the early 1980s as HMV RLS 765 and RLS 7707; my article on the marvelous Hollywood Quartet appeared in the February 1983 issue of *Commentary* and was reprinted in *The House of Music* (1984).

21 These indispensable performances are also not available as yet on CD. They have been variously available over the years in LP transfers; the most recent appearance was in the early 1980s as EMI (France) Référénce 2C 151-43067/8 (Brandenburg Concertos) and 2C 151-03960/1 (Orchestral Suites).

22 Not released commercially at the time, this performance was available on LP in the 1980s as CBS Sony (Japan) 20AC 1877.

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Literature and politics in Latin America

by Mark Falcoff

The task of the writer in Latin America has never been an easy one. In some countries literacy hardly surmounts functional levels; in others, where it far exceeds them, there still is not much of a public for which one can write. There are few serious universities or literary reviews, and the book trade is one of the most perilous occupations imaginable, subject to the anomalies of paper supplies, exchange controls, price controls, and a minuscule market. It is perhaps unflattering to say so, but Latin Americans are not great readers of books: instead, they consume huge quantities of newsprint, café gossip, and conspiracy theories. This is so notwithstanding the fact that the region has also produced some world-class writers, and shows every indication of continuing to do so.

In some ways, of course, the foregoing merely describes the situation of literature in any area of the Third World. But in one important regard, Latin America is quite different from, say, Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia: Latin Americans are more firmly situated within the Western literary tradition. Even so, one should not make too much of this: in some ways the region has more in common with other non-Western areas than we think. This leads to much confusion on the part of American and Western European readers, who are often taken in by false labels, and misunderstand the spirit underlying much of Latin American literary work. Nonetheless, Latin American literature has succeeded in gaining a foothold in mainstream Western culture, as a kind of exotic cousin whom we feel obliged to admit to our table. The relationship is sometimes based more on courtesy, guilt, and misunderstanding than on genuine affinity, but the writers themselves would be foolish indeed not to take advantage of it.

The subject of literature and politics in Latin America is, of course, extraordinarily broad. Yet a few ruthless generalizations will serve as a point of departure. The image of the writer as an independent critic of society and power, or as a voice in the wilderness defending humanistic and liberal values against an established order of violence and greed, is greatly exaggerated. Indeed, most writers in Latin America have been unusually drawn to power, for reasons both of economic necessity and cultural predisposition. Further, at least since the turn of the century, they have been particularly attracted to non-liberal or anti-liberal ideologies. More recently, their anti-liberal bias has been positively encouraged by the literary establishments in Western Europe and the United States. And finally, a new generation of liberal voices has succeeded in making itself heard in Mexico, in Peru, in the Southern Cone republics. But the future of this generation remains extremely problematic. In this article I propose to comment at length on each of these propositions.

Popular tradition places the roots of censorship in Latin America deep in the colonial

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period, when the Spanish authorities forbade the importation of works of creative imagination. It is true that Latin Americans were expected from the very start to subsist on a steady diet of sermons, writings of the Church fathers, and lives of the saints (some of which, actually, were very nearly pornographic). There was also, however, from the very beginning an underground trade in other books; the first copies of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, for example, were smuggled to the New World in crates supposedly containing bottles of wine. This serves as a useful illustration of the limits of censorship, which —like almost every other aspect of government in the region—has never worked the way it is supposed to.

To be sure, over the years there have been instances in which individual titles have been prohibited, or even physically destroyed, sometimes with considerable brio. These episodes have captured the momentary attention of the Western cultural public. For example, copies of Mario Vargas Llosa's first novel, *The Time of the Hero* (1963), were publicly burned at the military academy in Peru where much of its action takes place. The incident was seized upon by its American publisher to promote the work of a (then) unknown writer. The junta in Chile staged a widely reported (and photographed) book-burning episode shortly after the coup in 1973, and has seized and destroyed several book shipments since then. Despite such incidents, however, censorship has been a less serious threat to literature in Peru, Chile, and elsewhere than other things, including indifference, popular taste, and economic constraints. Only in Cuba and (until yesterday) Nicaragua has literature been conscripted into rigorous service to the state.

Dramatic individual instances of censorship mask a more important fact about the literary estate in Latin America—namely, that in most cases the relationship between writers and power has been symbiotic. During the first century of independence, literary skills of any kind were a monopoly of urban elites who dominated national affairs. Many writers were also presidents, generals, ministers, ambassadors, or prefects. While individual writers were persecuted and sometimes driven into exile, this was due to their affiliation with the party out of power, not to the allegedly subversive content of their work.

Moreover, in the absence of a broad economic base to support an independent or semi-independent intellectual class, writers had no choice but to recur to the State for economic subsistence. This point is particularly well established in Doris Meyer's recent anthology, *Lives on the Line: The Testimony of Contemporary Latin American Authors*.[1] Starting in the nineteenth century, but continuing well into the twentieth, many Latin American governments maintained writers on the national budget, often as consuls or even ministers at overseas legations; for example, Rubén Darío, the greatest voice of Spanish-American poetry, was happy to edit the official daily of the oligarchical regime in neighboring El Salvador, and, later, to represent the dictator of his own country, José Santos Zelaya, at the Court of Madrid. "He lived side by side with idiotic and reactionary politicians," Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier later observed, "whoring generals whom he found agreeable and even interesting." (The comment loses none of its impact by the fact that Carpentier himself later did exactly the same thing for Fidel Castro, for whom he served as ambassador to France.)

The Colombian poet José Santos Chocano served as a diplomatic agent for the Mexican bandit-*cum*-revolutionary Pancho Villa, and, even more deplorably, for Manuel Estrada Cabrera, ruthless dictator of Guatemala from 1905 to 1920. Successive Chilean governments maintained another great poet, Pablo Neruda, by offering him minor diplomatic postings in the Netherlands Indies and in Spain, and they did the

1 *Lives on the Line: The Testimony of Contemporary Latin American Authors*, edited and with an introduction by Doris Meyer, was published by the University of California Press in 1988.

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same for his colleague, also a Nobel laureate, Gabriela Mistral. Jorge Luis Borges for years worked at the Buenos Aires Public Library, and subsequently became the Director of Argentina's National Library.

The phenomenon is by no means limited to "conservative" Latin American governments or to military dictatorships of the Right. Indeed, the first Latin American government to recruit writers and artists systematically for specifically political purposes was a government of the Left—revolutionary Mexico of the 1920s and 1930s. The Mexican phenomenon deserves more than passing reference because it embodies the finished model to which so many other Latin American governments and political parties secretly aspire: a one-party state that dominates both its military institutions and its labor movement; that elevates corruption to a system; that deftly conjugates a left-wing foreign policy with a right-wing domestic policy; and that preemptively eliminates criticism from abroad by accusing skeptical foreigners (particularly Americans), of racism, imperialism, or "lack of mutual respect."

In some respects what historians call the Mexican revolution (1910-1940) was not notably different from other struggles for power in that country save for its duration, geographical extent, and the degree of physical and human damage inflicted upon a helpless population. But the new Mexican authorities understood (as their predecessors did not) that in order to create enduring institutions, it was necessary to conscript cultural workers, particularly writers and artists. These in turn could be used to create a façade of broad philosophical meaning or what in many ways was nothing but a pillaging expedition which culminated in the creation of a new class of "revolutionary" millionaires.

By nationalizing large sectors of the nation's economy, the new government evidently acquired vast control over culture; no newspaper could survive without advertising from state enterprises, or even go to press without newsprint from paper companies that were also now "socially owned." But the revolutionary political class in Mexico went well beyond negative sanctions—it created new opportunities for writers on state-subsidized literary magazines and periodicals, or for government agencies. It also created a state book-publishing house (Fondo de Cultura Económica), the first such in the history of Latin America.

Most important of all, the Mexican government mastered the use of house intellectuals in order to counteract unfavorable news stories abroad. The efficacy of the new system was first demonstrated in 1929, when José Vasconcelos, one-time minister of education (who was, in fact, responsible for creating many of the revolution's new cultural institutions), was defeated for the presidency of Mexico. Himself an honest man who abhorred violence and corruption, Vasconcelos was labeled by the regime as a "reactionary"—a damning accusation which had immediate resonance on both sides of the border. After a fraudulent election, his followers all over Mexico were set upon; many were murdered, and several dozen were buried in a mass grave. The candidate himself was lucky to escape to the United States with his life.

The intellectual class, however, kept silence or repeated the allegations of the government, while the American liberal community (*The Nation* and *The New Republic*) saved its disapproval for Vasconcelos, whom it saw as a backslider who had abandoned his revolutionary faith. Since then Mexico has enjoyed a unique immunity from criticism by American liberals otherwise so interested in the conduct of other repressive Latin American governments. This undoubtedly reflects, at least in part, the lengthly quiescence of Mexico's own literary and intellectual community—the crowning achievement of the triumphant revolutionary state.

While no other Latin American country has fully replicated the Mexican model, elements of it have appeared and reappeared periodically across the continent. Perón in Argentina (1946-55) and Allende in Chile (1970-73) used control of the economy to bankrupt

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potential advertisers in the opposition press (the latter failing to extinguish the independent *El Mercurio* only because of a covert subsidy from the CIA). Another recent example is the self-styled "left-wing" military government of Peru (1968-79) which in 1974 "transferred to the national majorities" all of the daily newspapers of Lima, throwing five hundred journalists and press workers into the streets for having allegedly worked for the "oligarchy" and "imperialism." For novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, this was the moment of a great epiphany; up to that time he thought of the intellectual as a kind of moral reserve of the nation. Instead,

> I recall my stupefaction upon seeing with what indecent haste legions of lawyers and philosophers, literati and sociologists jumped at the chance [for employment on the papers]. Among their number there was, naturally, the usual quota of rogues and professional opportunists, hacks that had served other, no less shady employers in times past. And there was also a tiny group of militants of the Communist party granted permission by their leaders to prostitute themselves—to infiltrate these places of power and put them to their own use before the adversary could do so.

To a man (and a woman) they accepted "the lie of the 'transfer to the social sectors' and went to work in the dailies to fulfill a function about which, from the very first, there could be no doubt whatsoever." No doubt some were driven by sheer economic necessity, Vargas Llosa continues, but given the wretched salaries they were paid, this can hardly have been the principal motivation. At issue was an appetite for power, "a fascination even greater in a country like ours, where, given the cultural poverty of the environment, intellectual life tends to be replete with frustrations."

These developments in Peru are characteristic of the explosion of urban centers in Latin America since World War II, an explosion that expanded the number of writers (or potential writers) well beyond the capacity of any state to absorb or co-opt fully. Even with greatly enlarged government payrolls, the safety valve of emigration to Western Europe or (particularly) the United States, the ubiquitous grants from foreign foundations and United Nations agencies, the supply still far exceeds the demand. Vargas Llosa's point remains valid, however: the difference between "ins" and "outs," "haves" and "have-nots," divides the literary community far more than any devotion (or lack of it) to democratic principle, commitment to freedom, tolerance for other people's ideas, or preference for an open political and social order. This does not prevent individual writers from producing very good work, often of no particular political import; but in their public role as repositories of the national culture, they are not, as a group, democratic exemplars.

If further proof were needed, there is the evident attraction that anti-democratic and anti-liberal ideologies have long held for the Latin American literary class. In the nineteenth century the reigning notion was positivism, which in its Latin American version justified rule by the enlightened few —the *científicos*, as they were known in Mexico; in the twentieth, it has been fascism, Communism, or both. Some have moved from one extreme to the other without difficulty; the most notable case was Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar, an early supporter of Franco who switched sides in the Fifties, participated in the Russell Tribunal on "American War Crimes" in Stockholm, and subsequently supported leftist police states in Cuba and Nicaragua; another example is Nicaragua's José Coronel Urtecho, a former admirer of Mussolini who until recently was the chief literary apologist for Comandante Daniel Ortega.

The number of Latin American writers who have been attracted to Marxism at one time or another, or have actually joined Communist parties, is legion, including Neruda, Guatemala's Miguel Angel Asturias (another Nobel laureate), Brazil's Jorge Amado, Argentina's Ernesto Sábato, Cuba's Nicolás Guillén. As in Western Europe and the

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United States, most of these men made their commitment in the Thirties and Forties, under the double impact of the Depression and the Spanish Civil War; some abandoned Communism later on, out of disillusionment with either the Hitler-Stalin Pact or the Khrushchev revelations of the crimes of the Stalin era. But unlike Marxists in Western Europe and the United States, they did not necessarily gravitate toward a liberal democratic vocation; more often, their Marxism became a bit like other people's Catholicism —a religion one continued to profess but no longer practiced. Paradoxically, with the exception of Neruda (and not always him), their work reflects little familiarity with the canons of Socialist Realism; rather, they tended to borrow their aesthetics from Zola and the French naturalists.

Another generation emerged in 1968, inspired by the Cuban revolution, the Vietnam war, and the example of Ché Guevara. These writers could be regarded more as "New Left" than Marxist or Marxist-Leninist; while their work is more explicitly political in content, it is demagogic or melodramatic rather than doctrinal in tone, utilizing set-piece techniques of social protest, nationalism, and anti-Americanism, often writing with an eye to the European and American book-buying public than to national audiences. By and large it has produced fewer writers of genuine quality—the best-known being the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano (just now being discovered in translation by New York's radical-chic literary community) and his compatriot Mario Benedetti, Chile's Ariel Dorfman, and Nicaragua's Omar Cabezas and Sergio Ramírez. Of course, the most famous member of this group is Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Unlike the others, however, García Márquez's novels have no political content whatsoever; in spite of this (or perhaps because of it), his political pronouncements (on behalf of Castro and, later, the Sandinistas) are unusually shrill.

The generation of 1968 also reflects a more cosmopolitan trend in Latin American letters—the internationalization, as it were, of certain formerly local themes, which in this case are protest, revolution, repression, solidarity, and also the supposed "authenticity" of native cultures threatened by North American consumerism. The "dirty war" against urban guerrilla subversion in Argentina (1976-83), but even more, the coup which deposed Allende in Chile, followed later by the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the struggle of the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador, led an emerging generation of Western Europeans to discover a special affinity with what they imagined Latin America to be. The point of convergence was a common hatred of the United States and the conviction that the real enemy of humanity was not Communism but a renascent fascism and American economic interests and mass culture (seen as one and the same thing). Of course, not all Latin American writers responded to this situation by plunging into political themes; but the more ambitious (or unscrupulous) among them could not help noting that revolutionary posturing was the most expeditious route to success in the North Atlantic publishing and literary worlds.

Again, Vargas Llosa gives us the best picture of this new kind of Latin American writer:

> Although he rarely belongs formally to a revolutionary party or engages in the difficult sacrifices required of a genuine militant, he calls himself a Marxist and on all occasions broadcasts to the four winds that American imperialism—the Pentagon, the monopolies, Washington's cultural influence—is the source of our underdevelopment.
>
> He has a keen sense of smell, which allows him to detect CIA agents, whose tentacles he finds everywhere, including Boy Scout camps, tours of the Boston Symphony, Walt Disney cartoons, or anywhere or any time someone questions state-controlled economies or one-party states as a social panacea.
>
> Meanwhile, while polluting the air of his own country with these sulphurous pronouncements, he is a permanent candidate for grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations (which he almost always receives), and

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> when—thanks to local dictatorships—he is exiled or chooses to exile himself, it would serve no purpose to seek him in the countries he supposedly admires and broadcasts as models for his own—Cuba, China or the Soviet Union—since the place he selects to continue his revolutionary struggle is New York University, or the University of Chicago, or California, or Texas, where he is a visiting professor only pending his appointment to a richly endowed permanent chair. Who is this person? This, dear friends, is the progressive intellectual.

The proliferation of such "progressive intellectuals" says even more about developments in the United States over the last twenty years—and particularly, developments in American culture and higher education—than about Latin America. It is obviously unfair to require a minimal coherence between thought and action by intellectual visitors to the United States, when native practitioners of philosophy and letters see no reason for it themselves. It is also unrealistic to expect writers in countries with limited economic resources to be insensitive to demands of the international market. It is perhaps worth noting, however, the degree to which the "long march through institutions" has created an alternative American culture, with its own requirements which at least conceivably shape the composition and design of its imports.

In any event, certain expectations on American university campuses (derived mainly, it seems, from such often-exhibited movies as *State of Siege*, *The Battle of Chile*, *Missing*, and *Salvador*) must be met. For example, one Chilean novelist (himself a former supporter of the Allende regime) experienced some difficulties on an American lecture tour in 1980; the discovery that he had accepted an airplane ticket and per diem expenses from the United States Information Agency profoundly troubled several students and faculty at one university in the San Francisco Bay Area at which he spoke; but the fact that he resided in his own country—to which he had finally been permitted to return from Spain the previous year—rather than in exile was what finally convinced some in the audience that his anti-Pinochet bona fides were not in order. It may be a coincidence, but so far his novels, though well known and highly regarded in Spain, France, and West Germany, have yet to appear in the United States.

Not only are many Latin American writers not political at all; others have become intensely anti-political as the result of their own experiences, particularly with "revolutionary" governments in Cuba and Nicaragua; still others—a small but distinguished company—have made the journey back from the authoritarian left to the democratic center. The late Argentine novelist Manuel Puig (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) is perhaps the best example of the first. As a student of film-writing in Rome in the 1950s, he was astounded to discover that intellectual circles in Italy were pervaded by a kind of left-wing McCarthyism. "Emotionally, I was split. On the one hand, a popular cinema of protest appealed to me; but on the other, I also liked cinema with a story, and this apparently classified me as a die-hard reactionary." Puig persisted, though, and eventually developed his own style and themes, which have to do with the confusion of sex roles and cultural models that afflict contemporary Argentine society—a subject so daring as to prevent his first novel, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (1968), from being published in Argentina until after it had already succeeded in a French translation.

Other novelists had their fling with revolution, and lost their taste for it. The best example is Guillermo Cabrera Infante, a rising star of Cuban literature, who worked on *Lunes de Revolución*, the cultural supplement of Castro's official daily, until he ran into problems with the censor. He eventually defected from his post as cultural attaché in the United Kingdom, and continues his work in England today. His novelistic work reconstructs Havana in the late Forties and early Fifties—the last moment of the old regime—and maps the parameters of cultural dislocation, in this case, the enormous

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influence of American culture in Cuban life, against the impossibility of fully replicating the foreign model. Though Cabrera Infante has done much to puncture the balloons of the English literary Left in their love affair with Castro—his remarks, when interviewed, are extremely astringent—he could hardly be said to have any strong political views of his own.

Chilean novelist José Donoso introduces a special variant, which might be called "post-political." His newest work, *La desesperanza* (1985; English version, *Curfew*, 1988), recounts the experiences of a left-wing folk singer who returns to Chile in the early 1980s after spending nearly a decade in Western Europe cashing in on European guilt and solidarity; he discovers that many of the people on the Left who stayed behind and faced the dictatorship in its most ferocious period are resentful of his success. For his part, he discovers a Chile entirely different from the one he left, exhausted spiritually from the ideological wars of the 1960s. Donoso's narrative style is droll and ironic, reflecting a cynical world view evocative of Cabrera Infante. A somewhat similar spirit pervades the magnificent novel of his compatriot Jorge Edwards, *Los convidados de piedra* (1978), which provides a long and somewhat skeptical perspective on Chilean political life, moving back and forth between the prewar period and the Allende years.

The most important development in recent Latin American letters has been the emergence of a new group of writers who have made a decisive liberal and democratic commitment, explicitly denouncing totalitarian regimes and utopian ideologies. The most important, and certainly the best known, is Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet, anthropologist, diplomat—and now Nobel laureate—whose magazine *Vuelta* has become the vehicle whereby a new generation of Latin American writers dare to experiment with dangerous ideas—dangerous, that is, to the Latin American literary-cultural establishment and its numerous and well-placed foreign allies.

Paz himself has been a dominant figure in Mexican letters for two generations. His own left-wing credentials leave little to be desired. His father was the Washington representative of the famous revolutionary General Emiliano Zapata; he himself rushed to Spain in the 1930s to demonstrate his solidarity with the beleaguered Second Republic; and in the later part of the decade he was close to the Trotskyite movement in Mexico. In 1968, he resigned his post as ambassador to India to protest the shooting of protesting students at the Plaza of Three Cultures in Mexico.

For some years now, however, Paz has been moving away from his earlier militance. As early as 1950, he wrote an article condemning the concentration camps in Stalinist Russia—a daring act for an intellectual in Mexico, where the enemy of one's enemy is automatically one's friend. As it was, the piece had to be published in Victoria Ocampo's literary quarterly *Sur*, in faraway Argentina. [2] He was almost alone among Mexican intellectuals in expressing reservations about the Cuban revolution during the Sixties and Seventies. And he publicly objected to his country's support of a 1976 United Nations resolution equating Zionism with racism; since his view happened to coincide with that of the United States, he was widely accused of treason to the Mexican nationality.

Neither then nor now, however, could Paz be regarded as a man of the Right. He has denied ever being an "anti-Communist," and in fact *Vuelta* conspicuously opposed U.S. policy in Vietnam, publishing pieces by Noam Chomsky and I. F. Stone. At a forum at Harvard University in 1972, he declared that given Mexico's dependence on the United States, its "transformation into a more just, freer, and more human society—a democratic socialism founded on our history—is inevitably linked to the United States." As such, he told his audience, "your struggle is our struggle. Our friends are your friends because your enemies are ours. . . .

2 See my article "Victoria Ocampo's 'Sur'" in the October 1988 *New Criterion*.

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We must join together—Mexican and American dissidents, to change our two countries!"

The major turning-point in his thinking seems to have been reached a little over ten years ago. As he told a Mexican journalist,

> The situation of 1977 is very different from 1937. After thousands of accounts by eye-witnesses—from Trotsky and Victor Serge at one extreme, to Souvarine and Solzhenitsyn at the other, with Khrushchev's secret speech in the center—it is impossible to close our eyes . . . it seems to me inexcusable to ignore or remain silent in the face of the reality of the USSR and the other "socialist" countries.

Even more to the point, while still embracing socialism as "the only rational solution for the West," this could only be the case if it were "inseparable from individual liberties, democratic pluralism, and respect for the rights of minorities and dissidents." In any event, he continued,

> for Latin America, socialism is not on the agenda. Socialism is not a method of developing more rapidly, but a consequence of development. Socialism in underdeveloped countries, as the experience of our century demonstrates, is rapidly transformed into state capitalism, generally controlled by a bureaucracy that—in the name of an idea—governs in a despotic, absolutist manner.

From here it was but a small step to openly condemning the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua as an effort to establish "a bureaucratic-military regime inspired by the Cuban model" in a now-famous speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1984. That speech—which had repercussions throughout Western Europe and Latin America—did nothing more than state the obvious; nonetheless, since then, Paz has found himself accused of being a right-winger. His political and economic views are still somewhat to the left of center, but his liberal democratic convictions are no more in doubt than they ever were. Most revealingly, when asked to enumerate the obligation of Mexican writers to their country, he replied, "I do not believe that writers have specific obligations to their country. Their obligations are to the language—and to their consciences." Contrast that with the statement of Nicaraguan writer Claríbel Alegría in *Lives on the Line*: "if there is no place [in Central America] for 'pure art' and 'pure literature' today, then I say so much the worse for pure art and literature."

Mario Vargas Llosa is some twenty years younger than Paz. He belongs more properly to the generation of 1968, but has, evidently, separated himself from it. Unlike Paz, he was unreservedly enthusiastic about the Cuban revolution in its earlier days; conversely, he has moved further away from his original ideas. In the first volume of political essays published under the evocative title *Against Wind and Tide* (*Contra viento y marea*, 1986), he reproduces at the very beginning an article on Cuba which originally appeared in the early Sixties in French, as a way of charting the ideological distance he has since traveled.

The articles in *Against Wind and Tide* suggest a very gradual process of movement. The great watershed seems to have been his appointment by President Fernando Belaúnde Terry to a national commission to investigate the conduct of the Peruvian army after an encounter between it and the Shining Path guerrillas in the high Andes. The commission eventually absolved the army of charges of wanton abuse of human rights, and Vargas Llosa defended its findings in an article in *The New York Times Magazine*. Since then he has customarily been referred to as a "right-winger," a label which no longer bothers him.

Like Paz, Vargas Llosa claims to have been influenced by the conduct of Marxist regimes in practice; as he has said, "policies designed to correct injustices are significantly less effective than [those inspired by] liberal and democratic doctrines and ideas—that is to say, those who do not sacrifice freedom in the name of justice." Unlike Paz, however, he has actively embraced liberal economics,

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and recently ran for the presidency of Peru as an advocate of drastic reform along free-market lines.

Pablo Antonio Cuadra is the grand old man of Nicaraguan letters—one of the most highly regarded poets in Latin America. For some years he has also been the editor-in-chief of *La Prensa*, the voice of the Nicaraguan opposition under both the Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinista regime. A self-confessed Nicaraguan nationalist, Cuadra is also an outspoken defender of liberal values. As he told a radio interviewer recently, "I think a nation has a basic human right: the right to the truth." When asked "what do you think the news media law should be?", he replied, "I have been asked that question for 50 years. . . . The answer is very simple: The best news media law is the one that does not exist." As for the "situation of contemporary literature in Nicaragua," he replied,

> Our work is to publish someone else's works, particularly independent writers, and—in a way that could be described as negative—create the proper climate for true, apolitical literature. To strip literature of political influence is one way to restore its freedom.

Nicaragua, of course, is one country in which literature has recently been understood to have a concrete political purpose. As Cuadra's compatriot Claríbel Alegría—one of the Sandinistas' favorite literary figures—puts it, "I do not know a single Central American writer who is so careful of his literary image that he sidesteps political commitment at this crucial moment in our history, and were I to meet one, I would refuse to shake his hand." Though the Sandinistas were often praised in the foreign press for such cultural innovations as poetry workshops for the army and police (!), during their decade of rule political or anti-political writers had considerable difficulty getting published. As Cuadra told an Associated Press reporter two years ago, "Some of our best young poets are in exile—in Texas, in Venezuela." In *Lives on the Line* he adds an ironic observation: "several of my friends who flaunted their independence in front of the right-wing dictatorships have happily bent over backwards to all of the demands of the [Nicaraguan] revolutionary leaders."

All of that may change in Nicaragua now, as it has in Mexico, where a new generation of writers now has at least the opportunity to be heard. Significantly, there is now a South American edition of *Vuelta*, edited in Buenos Aires by the Uruguayan writer Danubio Torres Fierro, who spent a number of years as a political exile in Mexico, where he came under the influence of Paz and his circle.

Though not a novel, Jorge Edwards's book *Persona non grata* (1977) deserves mention in this context. Though primarily a writer, Edwards was for many years a career diplomat in the Chilean foreign service. Because of his socialist convictions, he was selected to be Allende's chargé d'affaires in Havana in the first months of 1971. A long-time sympathizer with the Cuban revolution, he had made short trips to the island in the past, and even served on prize committees for Castro's state publishing house, Casa de las Américas. Nonetheless, the experience of living there and witnessing the regime's treatment of individual Cubans, particularly his writer friends, was a shattering experience. *Persona non grata* is a compelling memoir of his months in Cuba, and, with Milovan Djilas's *Conversations with Stalin*, ranks as a classic contribution to the literature of disillusionment. Significantly, Ariel Dorfman, who understandably did not like *Persona non grata*, could think of no greater insult to Edwards than to accuse him of treason to—of all places—Chile. Edwards remains a social democrat—closer in his views to Octavio Paz than to his friend Vargas Llosa—hugely admired by the democratic forces in Chile, whose man-of-letters laureate he has, perforce, become.

How successful will this tendency be? In large part, it depends upon two developments, one proceeding from abroad, the other at home. The death of socialism (or,

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rather, the death of the idea of socialism), particularly in Europe, has so far not made much impact upon Latin American intellectual life. Old habits die hard; so does the notion of the writer-as-militant. As Paz recently wrote, "Their grandfathers swore by St. Thomas and they swear by Marx, yet both have seen in reason a weapon in the service of Truth with a capital 'T,' which is the mission of intellectuals to defend . . . . Thus there has been perpetuated in our lands an intellectual tradition that has little respect for the opinion of others, that prefers ideas to reality, and intellectual systems to the critique of systems." It remains to be seen how long such a concept of intellectual citizenship can endure an ideological vacuum or a crisis of faith. Insofar as Marxism is concerned, one or the other (or both) are coming, whether or not the Latin American intellectuals are prepared for it.

It remains to be seen, also, what trends prevail in American intellectual life, particularly as they are reflected in the New York publishing world. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, the titles offered to American readers reflect to a disproportionate degree the ideological preferences of editors in the major book publishing houses, as opposed to either judgments of literary quality or the interest of readers. As a result, there now exists something of an artificial market for Latin American literature, one that encourages writers to produce work mainly with an eye to a public that will read them in translation. As the Mexican critic Enrique Krauze has shown in a controversial study of Carlos Fuentes, this threatens the authenticity of their work. It is easy to imagine a situation in which Latin American literature could exist in a kind of ideological cocoon for some years to come—or, perhaps, artificially maintained on a life-support system made up of, say, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Harper's* magazine, and Pantheon Books. It would constitute the literary equivalent of the current situation of higher education in the United States—a series of cultures scattered across a society which actually have little or nothing to do with it. In short, if revolutionaries wielding machetes and spouting the clichés of liberation theology is what the American book-buying public is thought to want, it is hard to imagine they will not get it. At any rate, they may not be able to buy any other kind of Latin American literature at their local bookstore.

In the end, everything depends upon events within Latin American itself. If, for example, there is a new round of right-wing military governments, a new generation of leftist writers will certainly emerge in response, with or without the quasi-incentive of foreign translations. At the same time, if the region succeeds in joining the liberal economic revolution spreading in Eastern Europe, that will change the local environment in many important ways, including literacy, patterns of consumption, and, inevitably, the role of the writer in society.

If, however, the republics simply continue on their present course, avoiding either reform or revolution, but failing to hold their ground as viable economic entities, then Latin American writers may find themselves in the position of their counterparts in the Arab world, where themes of suicide, frustration, and death repeat themselves in endless (and monotonous) variation. In that event they would not constitute a serious threat to liberal society, but then, there would be little for them to threaten. One can only hope that the future, both for Latin America and for its republic of letters, holds out a more hopeful prospect.

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Themes and variations: the art of Burgoyne Diller

by Deborah Rosenthal

In 1971, as a graduate student, I became an abstract painter after seeing the big Mondrian retrospective at the Guggenheim. What I learned from Mondrian was that abstraction is fundamental. In his Neoplastic style, all the means of painting are considered—tonal color, pure hue, lines as contours, flat shapes, modeled form, and so on; some are pursued, many others rejected. In that choice of conventions lies not only the basis of a style, but of painting itself. So for artists who come after Mondrian, it seems that there are many ways to work out of Mondrian, learn from Mondrian. This is why Mondrian is a great teacher of painting. He is a foundation upon which many sorts of painters have found that they can build.

The recent Burgoyne Diller retrospective at the Whitney brought back that *coup de foudre* I'd experienced almost twenty years ago on the ramps of the Guggenheim Museum.[1] Diller (1906-1965) was an American painter whose own acquaintance with Mondrian had been very much an act of artistic will. As a young painter in New York in the early 1930s, Diller was able to see only a few Mondrians (or works by other De Stijl painters) hanging in semi-public collections, and maybe a few more in the pages of the French art magazines. From these very small indications, Diller put together for himself the basis of a career, and as early as 1934, a twenty-eight-year-old freshly out of the Art Students League, he had begun to work in the Neoplastic style. He spent the thirty years of his life after that building an oeuvre on the right angle and primary colors of that style. Diller was practically a beginner then, at the beginnings of American modernism. Fortunately for him, though, this beginner was also an absolutist, and he jumped into Neoplasticism absolutely. Diller has since been attacked for his adherence to Neoplasticism; but the artists who were his contemporaries may have understood something about the magnitude of his decision to give up the diagonal and all but the primaries, to choose only what was relevant to himself from a Europe full of artistic personalities.

Diller's career, of course, had shadings, fallings-off, peaks, and middle ground. By the time I came to know his work it had reached the museum (as had many of his contemporaries'), but had been stowed away in the basement, save for a late, highly uncharacteristic painting that sometimes hung in the Whitney. There was always, though, some interest on the part of dealers: there was the luxury of two major shows of work drawn largely from his estate, mounted by the short-lived New York branch of the Texas gallery Meredith Long & Co.; shows at Goldowsky and Emmerich, and important group shows including a Diller or two at

1 "Burgoyne Diller" was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from September 13 through November 25, 1990. A catalogue, written by the show's curator, Barbara Haskell, has been published by the Whitney (180 pages, $29 paper).

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Washburn and at Marilyn Pearl. One could see enough to get to know the specific pleasures of a Diller painting. How hard it is to describe those pleasures, to evoke the particularity—the personality—of those paintings! The gap that Neoplasticism deliberately attempts to close between the subject of a painting and its formal elements cannot easily be pried open. The rough terms we use to do so are attempts to translate by analogy: floating rectangles, jostling rectangles, cold, practically effaced surfaces, dramatic black pictures, calm gray pictures.

The Whitney show, mounted in its ugly shoebox-modern galleries on the second floor, was an evenhanded, almost disinterested look at Diller. I wished that more of the indifferent work had been left out, and more of the best work—his *First Themes*—had been included. The show seemed to have been organized more by catalogue-thinking than by looking at the work on the wall. The question, for instance, of finding a way to hang thirty-odd years of work containing various shades of white so that all the whites would register as White appeared to have been ignored. (For its simultaneous exhibition of Diller's drawings, the André Emmerich Gallery came up with the elegant solution of painting its walls a soft Diller gray.) The Whitney retrospective was not a show where the paintings had simply been hung up and left alone for us to see, as the recent Hans Hofmann exhibit on the top floor of the Whitney had been. You sensed almost immediately, too, that you weren't meant to be there to have fun (indeed, the Whitney didn't expect you to be there at all—the two introductions to the catalogue predicted that this "not flashy" show would be ill-attended). Sandwiched into space that was crowded enough to end with sculpture blocking paintings in the last rooms, the exhibition began with a small group (one painting each) of European De Stijl painters—a Domela, a Van Doesburg, a Vantongerloo, a Mondrian—and continued with text and reproductions on foam core, and ambushed us with another Mondrian in the middle room, as well as a Mondrian reproduction. Brought to us by the museum that does the Show with Attitude every two years, this retrospective bespoke a lack of delight in its subject; a dutiful show, it existed to ask the question, and not necessarily in an unchallenging way, "What does development in Neoplasticism look like?" I wish that Barbara Haskell, the curator, had just let the works answer, "Like Burgoyne Diller, for one," and left it at that. From 1934 till almost the end of his life, Diller's paintings were often unmistakably Diller, that is, so good that we're conscious of a personality, dissolved in the work but still present as a sort of strong essence that perfumes the whole. The Whitney exhibition looked at Diller as if he were on the text page; as if Diller were what people in the art world call an "art-historical" painter.

When Haskell sets Diller's remark, "I never went to Europe. I went to the Art Students League," at the head of the catalogue text, it's Diller's Americanness she's reminding us of. Diller, a handsome young man from the American heartland (Battle Creek, no less), had gotten to New York in 1929, and enrolled immediately at the Art Students League. The League then was a place to go to hear the news from Europe, and Diller was surely in search of Europe even though he never did travel farther to find it. After studying briefly with Nicolaides and Bridgman, Diller settled in with Matulka, and finally worked for several months of 1932-33 with Hans Hofmann. He impressed Hofmann, who offered Diller free tuition when he started his school and who contributed the catalogue introduction for Diller's first solo show, held in 1933 at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York.

A New York exhibition was a rarity for a young American painter in the depressed, rather desolate gallery scene of Thirties New York, but Diller was a favorite son of the avant-garde. He was admired by Katherine Dreier, the collector who founded the Société Anonyme; a few friends involved him in the founding of the American Abstract Artists, the sole American artists' organization to parallel Cercle et Carré or Abstraction-

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Création. Diller was quick to join the new, federally funded artists' programs, and in 1937 was made head of the mural division of the Works Project Association/Federal Arts Project for New York City. By all accounts, he was a skillful administrator. This job took Diller almost completely away from painting and thrust him, too, into the bureaucratic work of committees and personality politics that most serious painters avoid like the plague. But Diller was eager to use his position to advance the cause of young artists. He commissioned over two hundred murals, some of which were abstract works by such artists as Ilya Bolotowsky, Albert Swinden, and Arshile Gorky. It was Diller's first moment of any influence, and his acceptance of a wide range of modernist painting for the Project murals expressed the viewpoint of a whole group of younger artists; he reflected almost exactly, too, the thinking of Jean Hélion, the young Frenchman in New York who wrote in the catalogue for the Gallatin collection of European advanced art that "the actual abstract art is an ardent debate." Diller himself also became one of the very few American painters to write about the new painting: in his role as a Project director, he found he had occasionally to write a defense of abstract art.

After the war put an end to the WPA/FAP, and after he had finished his wartime service, Diller went back to painting and began to teach at Brooklyn College. The job supported him till the end of his life. Rehearsing these remaining decades is dispiriting—we know ahead of time that the avalanche of Abstract Expressionism will bury the whole Thirties generation of avant-garde American painters. Diller, living a bit out of it in New Jersey, watched himself be washed out of the histories and, finally, drank himself practically into incapacity. His life soured—an early marriage to a beautiful bohemian named Sally Conboy turned into a permanent Lost Weekend, culminating in her death in 1954—and he spent almost the whole decade of the Fifties teaching young painters but not painting much if at all himself. A man with diminished expectations, Diller was remarried quickly, to a woman named Grace LaCrone who seems to have been no match in any way for him; he led what sounds like a rather sad existence with her. Finally, in the late Fifties, Galerie Chalette in New York offered him a show, and in the early Sixties he again produced a body of work; he was working still when he died in the beginning of 1965, after three Galerie Chalette shows had reintroduced him to the art world.

As it happens, I knew the other major Neoplastic painter to come out of the Thirties, Ilya Bolotowsky. When I first met him, I was trying to do abstractions that came out of Mondrian, Klee, and Kandinsky, and Bolotowsky was the only abstractionist whom I knew. I could talk to him about abstraction. I asked him then whom *he* had had to talk to over the years, and he said, "Nobody." Later, when I knew Bolotowsky better, we talked often of Diller; Diller's achievements as a painter were clearly important to Bolotowsky. That "nobody" rings in my mind, more than fifteen years later, because the isolation so many serious artists suffer in New York today is only the continuation of what began for artists like Bolotowsky and Diller in the Fifties—the isolation Bolotowsky meant when he answered me. Their work was regarded as academic, too dependent on Mondrian. Their individual voices could hardly be discerned; nobody much cared to listen.

Like Bolotowsky's, Diller's Neoplasticism began as synthesis: each painter came to Mondrian's work from elsewhere, and brought that elsewhere into Neoplasticism. Diller's "elsewhere" was, in large measure, Hofmann. When Hofmann had his classes at the League, his students said, he taught "Cubism from life." Hofmann's teaching may have involved various notions of space that interested Diller, but the greatest thing Diller got from Hofmann was what others who went on to become Abstract Expressionists also took from the German painter—a kind of animism about form.

When Diller encountered Mondrian, he found an artist who had deduced abstraction from Cubism, but an entirely different form

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of abstraction. The flat plane was the nexus of both Mondrian's and Hofmann's work, but their worlds were entirely different, their "nature" two quite different constructs. Hofmann's paintings invite us to read them almost as a sort of perceptual blur, a moment-to-moment report on what is passing in front of him, caught with the simplified shape, or the mark of the brush, or even the mark of a blob of paint. Hofmann's paint seems, always, loaded with the sap that runs out of organic things. Mondrian's forms (the rectangles of Neoplasticism) never change, never evolve, because he is not engaged (as say an Arp or a Klee was) in looking analytically at nature. He is interested, rather, in a sort of alternative to nature. Mondrian's reductions are related to natural forms as Byzantine figures are to those that preceded them in the classical tradition, or indeed perhaps to the real figures that walk in the space around us. Mondrian's forms are irrevocably, totally permeated with essences—frontal and hieratic, they are set in an indeterminate space; they are meant to confound direct experience, all the while binding it into a large and complex tapestry of paradox, even mystery.

Against the background of Hofmann's teaching, Diller met up first with the so-called classic-period Mondrians of the mid to late 1920s. These paintings, known sometimes as "white" pictures because of their large white areas, featured a very few primary-colored rectangles and black lines that often abutted the colored shapes. What Diller would later name his *First Theme* paintings, paintings that seem almost an initial response to these Mondrians, continued through his life, on and off. An often-reproduced diagram by Diller (shown first in 1961) shows his schematic version of the separate but concurrent "themes," as he called them, in his oeuvre. *First Theme* paintings presented the "free element"; *Second Theme*, the "element generated by continuous lines"; and *Third Theme*, the "element, submerged in activity."

Diller began painting *First Theme* compositions in the decade after he encountered Mondrian and within this series are to be found some of his most masterly early and late paintings. In the earliest versions, executed in the Thirties, Diller sets large blocks of flat color in a black rectangle. It's as surprising and as total a reversal of the relationship of primaries to white in Mondrian as could be. These compositions feel skewed, overweighted where we like to see "balance" in Mondrian: the eye's desire to see line posed against plane, to feel the equal-in-inequality importuning of each of these—this is thwarted. By taking away lines altogether —in these paintings his so-called "basic plane" is black—Diller sets up a new basis from which to explore the space of the painting. A Mondrian purports to let us see the drama of color and linear weight and measure constantly working itself toward resolution through polyphony. The conditions of Diller's black *First Themes*, though, seem already irremediably imbalanced. In this new "dis"harmony, one voice or actor has submitted to, been conquered and subsumed in, another. The intensely red and yellow planes Diller characteristically uses in these early *First Themes* come to seem extravagant reactive moves. As we move around each edge of each plane, the drama is renewed, as we expect each boundary to be a black line, but instead find—the black plane, outweighing, expelling, dissolving, silhouetting the colored planes.

The *Sturm und Drang* of Hofmann (this was a man quoted in the Diller catalogue as saying of pictorial space that it "sways and resounds") is there, too, in Diller's characteristic skewing of color symmetries. He begins often to use only two primaries, particularly a warm red and a warm yellow. The overwhelming warmth of the color makes both for a kind of suffocation and for a double role for white, as both release from blackness and pseudo-blue. Later, in the 1960s *First Themes* on gray grounds, Diller switches to a cool tonality, almost neon blues and lemon yellows. The color, skewed this time toward an uneasy evening out of tone, exists now in counterpoint to great disparities of size and even shape.

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In her catalogue, Barbara Haskell tells us some facts that illuminate the *First Themes*. She draws our attention to Diller's diligent work on the surfaces of his paintings, and suggests a source for it in Hofmann's dictum that each medium has its own qualities. Diller first tried egg tempera, and later took care to alternate the direction of his brushstrokes to create flatter, as it were, flat painting; he also sanded ridges created by overworking or reworking an area. The characteristically effaced-feeling surface that Diller got this way is a surprising abstract hand for a Hofmann student. But it is the hand Diller needs for tension—as a counterweight to the opposition of thing to non-thing, or thing to space, that the *First Themes* dare to inject into Neoplasticism. The squares and rectangles of the *First Themes* (even later in the Fifties and the Sixties when Diller paints many of them) are often large within the frame. They jostle, they seem to be crowded, to dance or hop or nudge each other, though they never overlap each other. The dramas of these paintings have all sorts of antecedents. When Greek vase paintings went from dark-figure-on-light-ground to light-figure-on-dark-ground, it was a change that went along with a gathering naturalism. Diller introduces into Neoplastic tensions-in-the-plane the effects of the vase paintings, which depended in part on their reference to the more natural way the eye picks out a figure from a ground. Diller's rectangles and squares of hue on black are thing-y; one can't make that go away by reiterating all the ways these compositions are, nevertheless, Neoplastic.

All three of Diller's themes didn't pay off equally. The brilliant *First Themes* are like tightropes suspended from two of the essential supports of the expressionist—exaggerated paint handling and the over-animation of all forms—but Diller's *Second* and *Third* themes, which seem to have predominated in the Forties, are based more closely on the later Mondrian, the Mondrian of the New York paintings and *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Diller seems an uncertain painter in the Forties (and of course during half the decade he hardly painted)—his louvered-and-laddered compositions made up of many small color planes on white seem only approximately fitted into their frames; the intervals are seemingly random, and Diller's marvelous sense of internal scale fails him. Their ocher tonality seems as tired a version of tube color as any second-rate painter came up with in the late Forties and early Fifties.

Although Haskell brought a Mondrian right into the room with the Forties Dillers, it wasn't Mondrian I thought of as I looked at those paintings. What they brought to mind were the different moments at which Diller and his contemporary Bolotowsky started to paint in reaction to Mondrian. For Diller, Mondrian's Twenties phase may have been the significant part of his oeuvre; it's Bolotowsky, though, who starts calling his compositions Neoplastic only in the late 1940s, who responds most significantly to the *final* phase of Mondrian. Already a geometric abstractionist, Bolotowsky may have seen in those Mondrians a way of incorporating the complex internal scale and ambiguous space of his earlier abstractions in a more absolute set of relations. It's Bolotowsky's paintings, especially his very pale canvases, "impurely" colored with more than one tint of the same color; or his late paintings with intense color and continuous, devilishly subtle shiftings between plane and line, that one wants to see juxtaposed to the Dillers. To some extent, Neoplastic painting after Mondrian must proceed from what Mondrian chose *not* to paint; the New York series (excluding the last two) opens avenues that Mondrian himself didn't pursue in the last works. Bolotowsky's Neoplastic pictures, which go undiscussed in the Haskell catalogue, show us a marvelous painter, a very different personality, building from Neoplasticism. Bolotowsky's mature work, like Diller's, is part of the proof that Mondrian is not Endgame.

Did the Whitney not want us to think this? The final rooms of the show, reminders of Diller's rising from the ashes at the end of the Fifties, were still for the most part disquieting. On one hand there were at least a

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couple of those marvelous gray-toned *First Themes* that I remembered so vividly from the Meredith Long shows. But then, too, there were the sculptures—not the beautifully totemic slim constructions in painted wood of years before, but Formica horrors in two dimensions—and the final paintings. Huge (6′ x 6′) and relatively empty fields of black laced up with almost uniformly sized strips of warm yellow, red, and white, these pictures—the last of his *First Themes*—are the work of a man who is, yes, still trying things; but who, perhaps through a kind of lassitude, has lost his sense of how and what to try. He may well have been just too tired. Having embarked upon what was a new motif—the gray *First Themes*—Diller, whose inspiration had always come in a lurch-and-stop rhythm, probably needed time to recoup, to let off steam in the drawings (where he often worked un- or anti-Neoplastically), to find his way back into the essential questions of Neoplasticism. But the possibility of showing the pictures and, I suppose, the positive reception of the most recent works, were pressures on Diller, whose health was already gone. Casting about for shortcuts, Diller went emptyhanded to Neoplasticism, and came up empty. For the very first time, the principles of Neoplastic composition appear to be technicalities in his pictures. The right angle may be there, but there's little sense that these pictures are actually coming into being through the relationships pitched at the right angle. Mondrian's dynamic analysis of the plane—resulting in the improvised, asymmetrical composition—is reduced to symmetrical configurations that feel static. And Diller's frantically cold surface gets to look machine-tooled; everything about these pictures makes them feel as if their fate had been sealed long ago.

There's no reason to think that, had he lived, Diller might not have emerged from this phase doing better paintings again. But the catalogue reveals that at his death, Diller left drawings on canvas for even *larger* paintings; and there's an ominous sound to Diller's comments, quoted in the wall text, that he was thinking of the Trinity, or the father-mother-child trio. This is Ad Reinhardtish, as Haskell suggests, and also the first time that Diller removes himself to an ironic distance from Neoplasticism; his language had previously been so plain and workmanlike that he fitted the whole "theory" of his work into words like "retain the basic plane." What Diller was hugging close to him was not, now, a painting idea but an Idea, a Great Idea. One sees why he came up with these analogies—Diller was far from stupid and the analogies that work really well for Neoplastic paintings are hard to come by—but a moment later, Mondrian's insistence on banishing literary associations begins to make more and more sense. The conditions of Neoplastic composition—not just what Haskell calls a "prescribed vocabulary," but also, even more crucially, the improvisatory process of composition—prevent it from being an orthodoxy or embodying any other orthodoxy. It is painting that is stripped and reduced in counterpoint to the persona of the improviser, not as an expression of his reduction, alienation, or un-individuality.

I wish that the Whitney show had not ended with a roomful of these last paintings. (I'd always felt that the one I've seen there was, if not marvelous, at least defensible.) A roomful of these paintings said, I think, that here was no "mere Thirties painter," here was a *Sixties* painter. This show was meant to stitch Diller neatly into the mainstream histories. No Mondrians were brought into the last rooms; there was a sense that the guy had broken free. From what? I wanted to ask. In the great moments of Diller's oeuvre—the black-ground and gray-ground *First Themes*, some of the drawings and painted constructions—one encounters in his theater of space a kind of romance of repression that equals Diller, much as a kind of elegant innocence equals Bolotowsky and an optimistic sensuality equals Mondrian.

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Poems *by Louis Simpson, Andrew Hudgins, Barbara Jordan & Alan Michael Parker*

The cabin

A woodpile and a fence,
grass, a hedge, a screen of trees . . .
I wish I had romantic neighbors
to talk about, like the lady
Yeats speaks of. When she was offended
by a farmer, her serving man
ran out with the garden shears
and brought her the farmer's ears
in a little covered dish.

I have no man to serve me,
but once, offended by the lout
who lives across the street,
I quarreled with him, loudly.
When his wife put her head out
and said, "Louis, I don't like your language,"
I replied, on the moment's thought,
"And I don't like your face."
We haven't been troubled by them since.

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Yeats created Hanrahan,
the mighty lecher. What
lust-driven, legendary man
shall I summon? Where we live
there are no legends, only gossip.
Yet the great matter of Troy
that ended with a whole town burning
began with an inch of skin
between a woman's skirt and stocking.

I give you my friend Roger
who recently left Denise
and is living with Diane
in a motel in Florida.
Watching daytime television . . .
Mosquitoes and tractor trailers
keeping him awake, making his heart race,
like a clashing of shields
and swords, and flights of arrows.

—*Louis Simpson*

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Raking out the nest

The ladder tilted. I took a deep
slow breath, stood very still, then stomped—
and drove the taller leg, for balance,
into the rain-soaked earth. For weeks,
two mockingbirds had nested there,
under a loose board in my eaves.
For weeks, I'd wakened to jay shrieks,
crow calls, and something like a mad
electric pulse—*tchak! tchak!*—that drilled
into my nerves. For weeks, I dreamed
of my teeth breaking in my mouth.
Now, barefoot, poised on the top rung,
I groped above my head, raked out
gray ashy lumps of dung, twigs, feathers—
and four blue eggs speckled with brown.
Wind blew the light trash back. It drifted
down my shirt collar, stuck in my hair.
Wings blasted near my face. I flinched.
The ladder shifted and I wondered,
absurdly, if I would miss the birds'
crazed voices howling through my house
like ghosts. I nailed the loose board shut
and smacked it with my palm. It boomed.
I eased down off the tilted ladder.
The clean house settled into silence.

—Andrew Hudgins

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Prayer for an ex-wife

Outside, wind whips green limbs of willow, loud,
against my window. Bees struggle in mid-air,
land, cling to yellow catkins plumed with pollen.
They ride the whipcrack till they've done their work,
then stagger, laden, back into the air
and grab another brutal ride. I watch for hours,
doze off, then waken to a salmon moon.
I stretch, and suddenly remember how, asleep
but restless in her sleep, my first wife lashed
the bedsheets, moaned, and shuddered. I'd spread my hand
on her back, just below the shoulder blade.
She sweltered—damp, hot to the touch. *Dear God,*
I prayed, *let me bear all her suffering.*
Let me take it for her.
That was when I was very young, when I
thought suffering and work could do all things,
or undo them. But now I pray, *God bless*
the willow, bless the bee, the wind, the pollen.
God bless the bedsheets and the salmon moon.

—Andrew Hudgins

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Dirt road, Kilcoe, Cork

Your farm had been by the sea, that was all
you said of it. And here were trees and fuchsia
hedges, the sea elusive—
closer than this, it seemed from the hill—
and invisible again. Alongside, a stream
shaded by plants that wouldn't thrive
in brine: willowy, but with stamina for wind,
and thickets that smelled of salt, sifting the krill
of insect life,
pipits and sedge warblers, the summer pollens.
As I coasted fast on my bike, a pure white bird—
a heron or spoonbill?—struck out from the water,
legs slack, wings
pursuing downstream, into the intricate greenness.
I braked, my neck thrust out
in the same stunned momentum as the thing
I'd ambushed. Then silence; the sediment of wonder.
Did you live *here* and hardly speak of it?
I followed your sparse guidance, one sentence that
unraveled
over farms by the sea in Kilcoe;
then I found the sea, cornflower blue, at the end
of a pasture that I crossed; a castle
on the headland, its upper rooms fluent with grass
the wind blew unremittingly.

—Barbara Jordan

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If steam is water's memory

The given: sumac, iris, summer rain
and sparkling asphalt steam on Lighthouse Lane.
A shirtless hardhat swigs a beer, reclines
beside a DANGER: PEOPLE WORKING sign.
Why here? This is the place where echoes go
to die, where history's brisk undertow
deposits mussel, horseshoe crab and whelk:
the ocean roaring in a fist of chalk.

If steam is water's memory, then mist
reclaims a continent submerged—iris
and ditch digger adrift in sleepy beds;
the sumac swamped by thick Atlantic weeds.

If A, then B. The street recounts its Rome;
the hands recall their clay, the mind its moon.

—Alan Michael Parker

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Theater

A miser and a hypocrite

by Donald Lyons

Classical comedy can seem the easiest and most inviting thing to slap onto a stage. A peruke, a bodice, a pratfall, an ogle . . . *et voilà!* Instant tradition. But in fact success there is almost the rarest of theatrical accomplishments. Take Molière. Eric Bentley once remarked, in reviewing a Comédie Française performance of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, that Molière "is fully accessible only in performance, and only in excellent performance at that." Recent New York productions of *Tartuffe* and *The Miser* by organizations other, alas, than the Comédie Française prompt a still sterner verdict. Molière, it is regrettably clear, is accessible *at all* only in excellent performance.

The Miser centers on Harpagon, a man in his sixties who obsessedly blocks life in two major ways—first, by stingy housekeeping and treasure hoarding and, second, by promoting such unseasonal marriages as his own to a young woman in love with and beloved by his own son and his daughter's to another old man (the main stimulus for Harpagon here is that the old man will take the daughter "without dowry"). Harpagon is a thoroughgoing anti-life figure, blinded by love of the inanimate to the simplest realities of animate life around him. He is a classic character in more than one sense, for *The Miser* is a more or less close adaptation of Plautus's *Aulularia*. The three most famous comic moments in *The Miser*—Harpagon's delight at the prospect of getting rid of his daughter "sans dot"; his mad soliloquy at the discovery of his treasure's theft, climaxing in an attack on the laughing audience; the protracted misunderstanding between the daughter's young suitor, confessing his love, and Harpagon, thinking he is hearing a confession of theft—all come right from the Roman comedian, although all are improved by Molière. (It must surely have been noticed that Molière may have taken the very name Harpagon from a remark of Euclio, Plautus's miser, complaining that his money has been stolen: "aurum mi . . . harpagatum est.")

This play, written in prose in 1668 during Molière's golden decade, is not of his greatest works. While it has its moments of enjoyable farce and a spicy atmosphere of Parisian life and behavior, the looseness, almost forgetfulness, of construction throughout and the perfunctory parade of comedy-closing anagnorisis tokens such as rings and bracelets leave finally an impression of less than unremitting concentration. It is not too much to say that *all* the interest is in the figure of Harpagon, and above all in that climactic tirade which ends in a threat to hang *himself* for theft. Here for a spell Molière consummately creates a total being at once fully comic and fully mad. (It is hard, though, to disagree with Martin Turnell when he says that this scene "knocks the rest of the play sideways.") Molière here realizes a complete *stage* humanity in his own mode, without attempting either to step beyond the limits of comic type altogether, as Shake-

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speare does with Shylock, or to invent a baroque rhetoric of obsession, as Jonson does with Volpone.

The Miser is, then, in its imperfection, just as is *Tartuffe* in its perfection, a difficult enterprise to undertake. The least we can ask of a production is that it manifest some reason for bothering. The Circle in the Square instead offered a veritable laboratory of pointlessness and fecklessness. For starters, they used the John Wood translation, a genteel British artifact of 1935 (since updated by him and further improved in a few small details by the present director, Stephen Porter). Its vocabulary is a cold shepherd's pie swimming with locutions like "What's a fellow to do?" and "What astounding effrontery!" This lazy choice of text struck the keynote of the evening. In Molière, people enter and exit; they stand about; they pause to listen; they move; they gesture and, rarely, touch—all with a formal decorum and a precision of placement and bearing that must cooperate in the articulation of the civilization of which they are, literally, the embodiment. Not a whisper of any strategy of stylization was audible at *The Miser*. Characters lurched on and galumphed off, slouched about in attitudes ranging from bored to dormant, and prattled in a singsong, pidgin patter. It looked like a first blocking. Mr. Porter has staged much high comedy (Shaw, Wilde, Molière) at the Circle over the years, and, while his presentations have never impressed me with any intellectual vigor or aesthetic power, they have generally had their mind on the evening's brisk business. Here perfunctoriness was the order of the night. And a lot of this sloppiness seemed merely abetted by the ugly and alienating horseshoe stage at the Circle, which cannot, so far as I know, be laid at Mr. Porter's door, but which, by the same token, he does not seem to have seen as a challenge to be met.

There is no point in belaboring by name the hapless roster of players who failed to animate the various lovers and servants, but two actors do solicit comment. In the role of the cynical go-between Frosine, Carole Shelley delivered what amounted to an impersonation of Maggie Smith, turning each helpless vowel into a mooing dipthong. (I see from the program that she in fact replaced Miss Smith in *Lettice & Lovage* in London.) Such an appropriation of an artist's surface mannerisms has point only in a satire upon that artist, but Miss Shelley, like most everyone else, did not seem to know why she was doing what she did. Harpagon was played by Philip Bosco, a stalwart and intelligent actor who has been a pillar of the New York stage and whom I've admired since seeing his Angelo in *Measure for Measure* in Central Park some thirty years ago. But he too fell victim of the general rudderlessness and attempted to fill the vacuum with an extravagant ranting naturalism. He moaned; he agonized; he rolled on the floor; he crawled on his belly like a reptile. In default of Molière's Harpagon he gave us Shylock—or, rather, a vulgarly melodramatic reduction of Shylock. He so accented the frazzle-locked dotard, mad in miserliness, that other facets of the character, such as the old man's besotted amorousness, seemed wrong here, as if from some other play. But Mr. Bosco has the power and the gifts, if guided, to do Molière justice. One would like to see his Alceste or his Tartuffe. But not at Circle in the Square.

The Willow Cabin Theatre Company, under the direction of Edward Berkeley, recently put on *Tartuffe* in a small theater on Twenty-eighth Street. The company, an ensemble formed in 1988 by Mr. Berkeley (he is, among other things, on the faculties of the Juilliard Opera Center and the Circle in the Square Professional Workshop), has performed, in various locales, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and new topical scripts. Mr. Berkeley has clearly striven to inculcate into his young company a sense of performing style. *Tartuffe*'s cast introduced each of the five acts with a patterned dance, the masked dancers wielding sticks or candles. These were, so to speak, steps in the right direction. The play was done in period; Hilary Rosenfeld's eloquent costumes spoke to the play much better than Gail Brossard's haphazard raiments did to *The Miser*. The

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set, in keeping with seventeenth-century practice, was minimal. The staging largely kept a sober decorum, despite a few irritating, just-couldn't-resist-it stabs at contemporaneity (prudes covering up the nudity of a little reproduction of *David*; a garish crucifix painted on the backdrop; a distracting Gregorian chant sounding offstage). Even when Tartuffe carnally has at Elmire *on* the table under which her husband is hiding, it seemed a permissible comic license. Mr. Berkeley's background in opera perhaps showed him how to arrange players attentively standing about without seeming to loiter. His youngish cast, too, spoke clearly and quickly, not attempting more characterization than the verse would bear. They were not, however, with the exceptions of Maria Radman's maid Dorine and John Bolger's husband Orgon, up to a level of articulation that might have truly animated these characters. Laurence Gleason unfortunately sought to clarify Tartuffe by saddling him with nervous tics and spastic sign-of-the-cross making. And also he looked lean and hungry and not, like Molière's plump sensualist, "gros et gras." (Incidentally, at the 1669 premiere, Molière played the gulled husband Orgon; the fat DuCroisy was Tartuffe; and Orgon's shrilly prudish mother was impersonated by a man.)

While the Willow Cabin *Tartuffe* cannot, despite its real virtues, be called a success, it had yet another inestimable advantage over the Circle's *Miser*. They were speaking Richard Wilbur's 1963 translation of the play into heroic couplets. Wilbur's renderings of the four supreme verse plays of Molière—*The School for Wives, The Misanthrope, Tartuffe, The Learned Ladies*—have long been acknowledged as glories not only of contemporary translation but of contemporary poetry. (To this company I would admit David Luke's *Faust*, Charles Johnston's *Eugene Onegin*, and Stephen Mitchell's Rilke.) What Wilbur was enabled to do by his choice of verse form, inevitably echoing as it does Pope, perfect voice of the Augustan civilization, was to approximate the moral and social texture of Molière. *The Misanthrope*, closest perhaps of all of Molière's plays to the flavor of the eighteenth century, gave Wilbur his best equivalence, but the American translator's dexterity and wisdom brought much to life in *Tartuffe* as well.

Like *The Miser*, *Tartuffe* presents an obsessed paterfamilias himself perverting the order of nature and of family (they were virtually identical for Molière, who was exceptionally alert to seismic, psychotic ruptures in the bourgeois family norm). But Orgon's idol, more disruptive than coins, is the *faux dévot* Tartuffe, enemy to pleasure, to nature, and (as Molière, under attack after the first version of this play in 1664 from various religious authorities and factions, makes abundantly clear in the 1669 version) to true godliness. Orgon's infatuated blindness is total:

> Yes, thanks to him I'm a changed man indeed.
> Under his tutelage my soul's been freed
> From earthly loves, and every human tie:
> My mother, children, brother, and wife could die,
> And I'd not feel a single moment's pain.

Wilbur, while keeping to balanced and decorous rhetoric, gets here the madness of Orgon, not least through the long vowels in the stressed rhyme words "freed," "tie," "die," "pain." Orgon's brother, the man of reason Cléante, answers Orgon thus:

> That's a fine sentiment, Brother; most humane.

Wilbur's broken-rhythmed response hits the medicinal sarcasm of Cléante, who is (along with *The Misanthrope*'s Philinte) the richest of Molière's raisonneurs, convincingly articulating the underpinning values of modesty, moderation, and "la droite raison." Dorine is likewise the sassiest and most efficacious of the vox-populi servants; witness her famous description of an aging beauty turning to religion:

> She quits a world which fast is quitting her,
> And wears a veil of virtue to conceal
> Her bankrupt beauty and her lost appeal.

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This naturally evokes Pope:

> Still round and round the Ghosts of Beauty glide,
> And haunt the places where their Honour died.

—which shows Wilbur choosing just the way to bring Molière into living English. Like Cléante, Dorine attempts to bring Orgon to his senses; she contrasts his wife's wasting illness to Tartuffe's concurrent gourmandizing only to hear Orgon respond by calling Tartuffe "le pauvre homme."

Orgon, frozen in typical anti-life stubbornness, is willing to wed his daughter *to* and disinherit his son *for* Tartuffe, who is undone—for a bit—only by his own lust for Orgon's wife, Elmire. Tartuffe is in fact a monster victimized—humanized—by his own body, of which he is preternaturally conscious. His very first words are:

> Hang up my hair-shirt; put my scourge in place.

Then he turns at once to Dorine:

> Cover that bosom, girl. The flesh is weak.

But his greatest moments come when he is putting the moves on Elmire. She is shocked. He reasons:

> A love of heavenly beauty does not preclude
> A proper love of earthly pulchritude. . . .
> I may be pious, but I'm human too:
> With your celestial charms before his eyes,
> A man has not the power to be wise.
> I know such words sound strangely, coming from me,
> But I'm no angel, nor was meant to be.

Here is Molière:

> L'amour qui nous attache aux beautés éternelles
> N'étouffe pas en nous l'amour des temporelles. . . .
> Ah! pour être dévot, je ne suis pas moins homme;
> Et lorsqu'on vient à voir vos célestes appas,
> Un coeur se laisse prendre et ne raisonne pas.
> Je sais qu'un tel discours de moi paraît étrange;
> Mais, madame, après tout, je ne suis pas un ange.

In the first two lines, Molière puts cooing vowels in the seducer's mouth; Wilbur uses panting "p"s and the hot rhyme "ude" (plus a buried homophone in "preclude"). And in the jagged begging of "I may be pious" and "I'm no angel," poet and translator march together in the creation of Tartuffe's complexity. For he is complex: while there is a farcical hypocrisy in everything he does, there is a kind of sincerity as well. It is much more rewarding to view Tartuffe as, at least in spurts, a man riven between the jansenistic dictates of the spirit and the imperatives of the flesh. His torment is, to be sure, contained within the comic frame, as Alcestes's in *The Misanthrope* and Molière's Dom Juan are not (but, interestingly, as that of the somewhat kindred Angelo, in *Measure for Measure*, *is*.) Molière, it is useful to remember, shared a century with Racine and John Donne.

When foiled, Tartuffe metamorphoses into simply a malevolent devil, expropriating the bamboozled family, until he is himself foiled by the supreme power of Louis XIV operating as *rex ex machina*. The Sun King's representative proclaims the godlike discernment of the ruler:

> We serve a Prince to whom all sham is hateful,
> A Prince who sees into our inmost hearts,
> And can't be fooled by any trickster's arts. . . .
> His sovereign reason is not lightly swayed,
> And all his judgments are discreetly weighed.

(Again, note how Wilbur makes the rhyme words do the work of meaning.) Louis, we know, backed Molière through the *Tartuffe* controversies and elsewhere. But the writer's Pindaric praise is more than professional gratitude, as many moderns dismissively label it. It is, like Pindar's, the confidence of a great and daring artist that he is at one with the highest guarantors, as well as (un-Pindarically) with the humblest practitioners, of his society's secular and religious values.

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Art

Romance

by Jed Perl

Once upon a time there were artists who believed that there was a natural order to painting—they were called traditionalists. Then there came along artists who emphasized the need for revitalization through disorder—they were called avant-gardists. Then the avant-garde triumphed and disorder became the new natural order. So does that mean that a contemporary painter who wants to reinstate the old natural order believes in the disordering of disorder?

Something like this brain-twister comes to mind in front of the convention-twisting figure paintings that Gabriel Laderman, a traditionalist with a taste for disorder, has been doing for the past few years. The most impressive painting in Laderman's show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in October, called *Family Romance II*, centers on a woman, naked and hugely pregnant, seated on a bed. Very close to her on the bed sits another woman, this one clothed. The two women are flanked, at left, by a clothed man, and at right by a miniature man, a sort of homunculus, who stands, unclothed, on a chair. The painting, set in a not especially large room rather full of furniture, presents four figures, each of whom seems to be dreaming his or her own daydream. The small figure might be a figure in one of the others' dreams. The painting is big: 72 x 108 inches. But the world it describes is domestic, private. Something in the odd way that the figures find themselves in the same space yet are isolated by their thoughts recalls the interiors of the seventeenth-century Frenchman Louis Le Nain. But in place of Le Nain's peasant outfits, we have nudity; and in place of Le Nain's delicate orchestration of grays, we have a strident mix of salmons, yellows, and blacks. It's as if a painting by Louis Le Nain had been given electric shock treatment. Or, maybe, considering the bizarre, almost Futurist-looking play of shadows, it's as if a Cubist painting had been given electric shock treatment with the object of turning it into a Louis Le Nain. And had been left somewhere in between Cubism and Le Nain.

What does *Family Romance II* mean? Like *Family Romance I*, which hung catty-corner at Schoelkopf, it contains a watching figure (female in *I*, male in *II*), a central figure (male in *I*, female in *II*), and a homunculus (female in *I*, male in *II*). There's something going on here that has to do with the child's fantasy conception of the relation between his parents—Freud's "family romance"; but I rather doubt that these are figures whose mysterious relationships can be unlocked by some literary or allegorical key. The subject here is the juxtaposition of psychic states, and psychic states are something that a painter can point to but never analyze in the way that a novelist or a psychiatrist can. These paintings are about the isolation of the psyche: this is more or less how we read Le Nain's work, too. And, just as in the Le Nains, a person's state is evoked through the play of forms and the character of shadows and angles, so I would say that the meaning here isn't narra-

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tive (there is no narrative!) but formal—a meaning that emerges from the play of forms.

Laderman, who was born in 1929, has in recent years learned how to construct the space inside a painting in increasingly idiosyncratic and imaginative ways. In the *Family Romance* paintings, he plays with edges and surfaces in such a way that the interpenetrations of forms and the unexpected opacity and transparency of objects recall Cubist painting: what the artist presents cannot entirely be reconciled with our experience of the natural world. Laderman is more ready than heretofore to allow representational forms to fragment into abstract forms. Here he has also, for the first time in his career, embraced the modernist idea that the character of the paint surface functions as an actor in the pictorial drama. This is formalism, but it is not quite what people think of as formalism. It is worth pointing out that this shattered world offers a complication of formalism that, while it risks ambiguity and disorder and contradiction in ways not characteristic of Greenberg-type formalism, is nevertheless, like Greenberg-type formalism, an affirmation of the otherness of painting, of painting being outside of life. If this makes *Family Romance II* sound tendentious, I hasten to add that while this is a painting very much of pieces, the pieces do cohere into a concise image: a pregnant woman caught in the midst of a domestic maelstrom.

When Laderman began showing and being reviewed regularly in the Sixties, it was as a painter of rather severe landscapes and still lifes. When, in 1970, the Whitney Museum mounted a show called "22 Realists," Laderman's work was included along with that of, among others, William Bailey, Jack Beal, Alfred Leslie, and Philip Pearlstein. Though Laderman showed figure paintings in the early 1970s, by general consensus his strongest works were the still lifes in which a few humble objects, arranged on a shelf or table, conveyed an almost Surrealist stillness, and the views of New England towns in which time seemed to have stopped a generation ago. The clarity of Laderman's paintings, like that of much of the representational work done back then, was presented by the artists and their supporters as an antidote to the supposedly obfuscating character of abstraction. (Most of the new realists had begun as abstract painters.) Sidney Tillim, who was involved with the movement both as a painter and a critic, argued for the existence of an audience that would be attuned to the progressive nature of a sophisticated modernist representation. Yet by the mid Seventies, representation had become just one more of the regular flavors in the ice cream parlor of contemporary styles; or else representation lingered on at the fringes of the art world as a sectarian ideology, a polemic against abstraction.

Laderman didn't show in the late Seventies or early Eighties. His first exhibition of figure compositions, at Schoelkopf in 1986, called into question all the previous decade's definitions of representational art. The big painting in that show, *The House of Death and Life*, was too Surrealist and (despite the tight paint-handling) too influenced by Cubism to be accepted as any kind of normative representation. In taking on the figure, which many people regard as the representational painter's ultimate challenge, Laderman had paradoxically been forced to confront the limits of representation. In the past, when he had painted cups and pitchers and trees and clouds, one felt that he was an objective—a perhaps overly objective—observer. Now, when he is painting people, he seems to have thrown objectivity to the wind: as a figure painter, he's a fantasist. In *The House of Death and Life*, which is his best figure composition so far, the figures have the size and the weighty unreality of the figures in the Bunraku puppet theater of Japan. The revelation of *The House of Death and Life* has to do with the way in which these puppet figures, in the six rooms of their apartment-house space, create little dramas that are less a series of mirrors held up to the world than a Cocteau-esque magical mirror that leads to a darker, parallel world of dreams. In the 1980s, Laderman has dis-

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covered a furious, saturnine, hyperbolic universe. It has everything to do with the artist's sense that the figure and its environment are lashed together in an overarching, symbolic design. In relation to *Death and Life*, *Family Romance II*, with its greatly enlarged figures, could be an attempt at a freer, looser sense of the figure. Yet the impastoed surface of the new painting, and its passages of virtual abstraction, keep pulling the figures back into an imagined world. If *Family Romance II* doesn't speak with the fantasy completeness of *Death and Life*, it may be because, in becoming a loose painter of sorts, Laderman is taking off in a new direction and is not entirely sure of himself; whereas the understated paint-handling in *Death and Life* was consistent with the way that Laderman had been working since the Sixties, and provided a perfect medium for his imaginative forays.

The *Family Romance* paintings are a reach for the artist, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Yet the recent exhibition does not perhaps show *Family Romance II* to best advantage. Here, as in his 1986 show, Laderman has given too much wall space to his work with the studio nude. In the large group of pastels of nudes included here, he has a far more self-confident, virtuosic command of the nude than in the pencil drawings and paintings of nude women in the last show. But there's still something about the subject of the nude that doesn't work for Laderman, perhaps because his late-modern anxiety cannot be encompassed by so early modern and even premodern a subject as the studio nude. The large single figure in this show, *Ellen Standing*, is a dull virtuoso turn: I submit that Laderman's most ardent fans would not give it a second thought if it didn't bear his signature. On the other hand, *Ellen Lying Down* is an exercise in showoffishly loose painting, it's as if Laderman were exclaiming, "Look, I can put in brushstrokes for their own sake." Looking at this show, I kept wanting to take out some of the paintings and put in paintings from the 1986 show. The large, sketchy oil studies for *The House of Death and Life* only begin to make sense in the context of the newer paintings. On the other hand, the murder triptych included here, *Murder for Profit* (which contains a spectacularly, curiously foreshortened male figure), should really be seen in relation to the murder triptych in the last show. Perhaps there ought to have been an intermediate show, which included paintings that have been shown outside of New York but not in New York, such as the three-part *Drunkard's Progress*, and a painting of college-aged kids playing cards.

This show, like Laderman's previous one, gives the sense of an unfolding journey. Perhaps because Laderman is an artist without natural ease, an artist who labors to create his effects, he is destined always to be both behind and ahead of himself. The sorts of distortions that one finds in Laderman's recent figures—where limbs are diminished by foreshortening into odd, unnatural configurations—were already present in the work that Philip Pearlstein and Jack Beal were doing twenty years ago. And when one looks at it that way, one may wonder what has taken Laderman so long. But this could be a case in which the tortoise has outstripped the hare. Laderman is not the first artist of his generation to dramatically distort the figure, but he is the first artist who has found ways of incorporating those distortions into a larger drama. There's a ferocity in Laderman's paintings that comes, perhaps, from having done it all the hard way. Laderman's theme is the modern relation between violence and sexuality and love. This is one of the conventional themes of the art we see in the downtown galleries and performance spaces. But in Laderman's recent paintings the conventional becomes unconventional, because the artist has a sense of pictorial order, and he uses it to measure the nature and extent of the contemporary disorder.

In 1975, the artist Robert Kushner mounted, at the Kitchen in New York City, a performance piece called *Persian Line*, in which, after several models had "undressed completely, [they] donned a Kushner garment, and promenaded through the space, accompanied by the artist's satiric fashion commen-

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Francesco Clemente

A Retrospective of the Prints: 1980-1990

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tary in the style of a couturier show. After each modeling turn," Janet Kardon explains in an essay called "Opulent Subversions," "the outfit displayed was casually cast onto a pile, to await the option of being hung with pushpins as an unstretched canvas." That was, as they say, then. Now, fifteen years later, Kushner is painting on canvas stretched on conventional rectilinear supports. If the sober, even severe arrangement of his show at the Holly Solomon Gallery in October was any indication, he seems to be in dead earnest about the results. I may be exaggerating the distance between the performance artist and the paint-on-stretched-canvas artist. In the fifteen years between, Kushner has mostly done mixed-media paintings on unstretched canvas, which exist somewhere between painting and performance. But I don't think I'm entirely mistaken in giving the impression that Kushner's work of the past couple of years has the quality of a statement, a decision. When Kushner, who was born in 1949, was young, Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell were belting out a song with the chorus, "Ain't nothin' like the real thing." Well, in art painting on stretched canvas is doing "the real thing."

The three horizontal flower paintings that hung in the main room of Kushner's show aren't exactly satisfying works of art, yet they have a restrained hedonism about them, and this goes a long way toward satisfying a viewer's taste for lusty yet elegant and (sometimes) witty effects. Each of the compositions is made up of three square canvases, exhibited side by side, edge to edge. Kushner subdivides the squares into smaller squares and rectangles, then works his oversize floral arabesques against these planes of lush color. He uses gold leaf, copper paint, and different kinds of glitter (one kind consists of minuscule lengths of what looks to be copper wire). Kushner's flower paintings may remind some people of Jennifer Bartlett's work, which also fits representational elements into an idea of pictorial structure derived from Minimalism. But Kushner has a feeling for materials and for the pleasures of paint that Bartlett simply doesn't have. Kush-

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ner isn't an especially brilliant draftsman—he doesn't know how to build form with line; but he has some interest as an inventor of snaky, thickening-and-thinning lines. His shoals of paint, sometimes dusted with glitter, are amusing to look at. In *Abundance* there's an invigorating clash of hot pink and leafy green. *Blue Delphinium* has mysterious, off-key-yet-harmonious blues. These three paintings are rather artificial, rather fanciful. And the image of the flower, which is natural but can feel man-made, is just the right emblem for this hothouse sensibility.

The allusions and associations that Kushner sets off are very hip. He's precisely of this moment when Andy Warhol looks to many people like a major master, and the downtown obsession with the styles of the baby-boomer's youth has not only made Minimalism but also, now, Color Field, look up-to-date. Kushner's flowers recall the poster-ish scale and ostentation of the Warhol flowers, which turned nature into a form of Pop. And Kushner's ooey-gooey surfaces look like a direct quote from the too-pretty-for-words surfaces of Olitski and Poons. (So does the dusting of darker tones recall recent Color Field.) Kushner's work conveys a playfulness about style: this has always been his subject. It was his subject in his collage paintings; yet as long as Kushner was collaging elements together, he was exercising his style savvy to almost no visible effect. And the nude—which was often incorporated as a drawn element in those collages—was too complex a form to be reduced to his luxe arabesques. Going onto stretched canvas, giving up the figure for the relative simplicity of the flower, Kushner seems to have found a center, a sense of order. (Not that the flower paintings always work out: many of the one- and two-panel paintings in this show were overloaded with decorative flourishes.)

Like many of the Pattern and Decoration artists, Kushner has for a long time been an admirer of Raoul Dufy. In 1984, when Holly Solomon mounted a Dufy show, Kushner wrote a brief essay for the catalogue. He observed that "Dufy first attracted me almost as a matter of perversity. . . . My nose for bad taste was aroused." And then he recounts a sort of change of heart, and how, after learning more about Dufy, and especially about his work as a fabric designer, he "began to respect Dufy, the highly elegant and intelligent magician." What is missing in Kushner's comments on Dufy is some sense of how Dufy the painter and Dufy the decorator relate. Kushner's earlier work in mixed media suggested that he didn't see that there was any distinction between painting and decoration: the chaotic character of his work was the result. Did Kushner really think that you could make a painting decorative by incorporating decorative fabrics? Oddly, in the new paintings, where he has accepted many of the conventions of painting, Kushner has also for the first time demonstrated some clarity about the conventions of textile design. The clear color shapes, the working of representational elements against rhythmical patterns: these recall some of Dufy's textiles. In the Dufy statement, Kushner says that Dufy is a painter without a "dark side." I don't agree. I see dark tones in his ascetic late works—the studio interiors, particularly —and I suspect that Kushner's inability to see that side of Dufy reflects an inability to respond to the nuances in School of Paris painting. It was the anti-traditionalism of the avant-garde—Warhol's devil-may-care paintings, the anything-is-art pose of the performance artists—that led Kushner to Dufy. That's coming in through the back door: it's a strange angle on Dufy. In these new paintings, though, Kushner has achieved a pictorial expressiveness that justifies some connection to Dufy. He has begun to grasp the formal impulse that links decoration and pictorial invention. In his statement on Dufy Kushner speaks of Dufy's being "satisfying to consider seriously. And a hell of a lot of fun." This recalls the name of Lincoln Center's summer avant-garde festival,"Serious Fun!," a term meant to simultaneously one-up those who think serious isn't fun and those who think fun isn't serious. Serious and fun are both words that in recent years have become so ideologically charged as to be difficult to use; but something of both is present in the

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new Kushners. This artist does not even now have his act completely together, but at least now he knows that there ain't nothin' like the real thing.

When Pierre Matisse died a year and a half ago, and the gallery that bore his name closed its doors, whatever hopes some of us harbored for there being another gallery show of new paintings by Balthus disappeared. Balthus had shown his new painting at Pierre Matisse in New York for half a century, at roughly decade-long intervals. In 1967 there had been the *Three Sisters* series. In 1977, he exhibited his two Japanese figures, the most important Oriental-inspired art to be produced in Europe since the 1880s and Van Gogh and Seurat. That 1977 show was a sensation. It had been a long time since a New York gallery brought us news from the School of Paris. As it turned out, that was also the last time.

In the absence of regular gallery shows, we have been forced, since the Metropolitan's Balthus retrospective of 1984, to learn of Balthus's new work from the occasional appearances of paintings in European exhibitions (if one is lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time). And we have been forced to depend on reproductions. In an era when paintings are routinely flown all over the world, it may seem odd that we are reduced to studying the work of a contemporary artist in reproduction. But we have no choice: Balthus, by refusing to exhibit, has returned us to an earlier period when artists and connoisseurs awaited the graphic reproduction of major new work that they could not hope to see at first hand. It is because Balthus is an artist whose work is so difficult to see that the publication by Rizzoli of a new, revised edition of the 1979 monograph by Jean Leymarie, a longtime friend and confidante of the artist, is a major event.[1] The book has only eight new reproductions and a few new pages of text; but when three of the reproductions are of paintings we have barely seen in reproduction, and one of those paint-

1 *Balthus*, by Jean Leymarie; Rizzoli, unpaged, $150.

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ings is the most eccentric of Balthus's entire career, and one page of text gives us a close analysis of that painting—well, this could be the biggest art book of the year.

Girls and young women are, now as in the past, Balthus's essential subject. In the 1980s, though, Balthus appears to have been less inclined to anchor these figures in a particular period or environment. Gone is the Biedermeier world of the pre-World War II work. Gone is the conceit of the girl as a *jeune fille* in a provincial farmhouse that ran through much of the work of the 1950s. Gone, too, is the exoticism of the Turkish and Japanese paintings. The stylessness of these recent Balthuses has its origins in some of the paintings that he did toward the end of his tenure as director of the French Academy in Rome. In *Katia Reading* and *Nude in Profile*, both shown at Pierre Matisse in 1977, Balthus places figures against indeterminate backgrounds—the ageless walls of the Eternal City. These paintings, however, strike me as a little generic, overly simplified, perhaps overly sweet. It is in the series of paintings that Balthus worked on in the early 1980s, after his retirement from the French Academy to a château in Switzerland, that the artist really began to come to grips with his vision of a girl who lives in no particular time or place. The theme here—a girl in bed, waking up (as the title of one of the paintings tells us), or entertaining a cat with a mirror or a toy bird—evokes the blurred consciousness of moments when one is waking or falling asleep or daydreaming, when one doesn't have a clear sense of time and place. The thick surfaces of these works, with their unearthly mix of greens and tans and silvers and golds, underline the fairy-tale atmosphere. Balthus has never been a greater painter of the figure: the sensuous formality of these girls echoes Simone Martini, and also Correggio. The revised edition of Leymarie's monograph includes two new additions to this series. *Nude with Guitar* (1983-86), in which the girl's torso and the guitar are presented as parallel instruments, may be a bit too hard in some of its forms, may lack the melting poetry of the greatest paintings in this series; but I speak only from experience of the reproduction, so this is speculation. In the most recent variation, *Cat with Mirror II* (1987-90), the girl is clothed, and the insistent frontality of her limbs, each of which seems to move off in its own direction and yet remain fixed in a single parallel plane, suggests the formal elegance of a figure on a Romanesque tympanum. My feeling is that this is another Balthus masterpiece.

In addition to this great cycle of paintings of girls in bed, the 1980s brought us Balthus's two most personal statements about his relations to his models and muses. *The Painter and His Model* (1980-81) is in the permanent collection of the Pompidou Center, and is exhibited there from time to time but far from frequently. In this painting there is something diffident about the artist's relation to the young woman who kneels before a chair, leafing through an album. The artist has his back to her; he has gone to the window to pull the curtain aside. Leymarie, in describing this painting, says that the girl "is the sphinx and deity of the painting, [the artist] its everyday officiating priest." In the *Large Composition with Crow* (1983-86)—which is only now available to American audiences in a good reproduction—the artist is another kind of attendant. Here, again, we see a girl on a bed. The room is darkened, somber. She laughs and gestures at the crow, who looks down at her from a shelf. In front of the bed stands a slender naked figure, who is the size of a very small child but has the proportions and physique of an adult male. He carries a green cage. We have Leymarie's word that this figure is a self-portrait. As in *The Painter and His Model* and the earlier *Passage du Commerce Saint-André*, the artist is seen mysteriously, from the back. Leymarie explains that the bird is, in the Eastern tradition that Balthus is thinking of even as he is thinking no doubt of Baudelaire and Poe, "a divine messenger and a bird of knowledge." Leymarie also comments that it is in the cage that the man carries that "the bird ought to be lodged." Thus, perhaps, it is the artist who attends both bird and girl, facilitating their enigmatic encounter. When I first saw

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this painting, half-obscured in a photograph of a home interior in the magazine *HG*, I took the girl's smile for a howl, and the painting for a nightmare. In this new, roughly $8^{1}/_{2}$ x $11^{3}/_{4}$ inch reproduction, it takes on a gentler character.

The more Balthus reveals about himself, the less he resembles the manipulative voyeur of his critics' imaginings. In *The Painter and His Model* he seems distracted, he turns away from the girl. In *Composition with Crow*, he is her attendant, her servant. Leymarie is careful to make the point that both the man and the girl are naked in the *Composition with Crow*. This equality of undress is significant: it suggests that Balthus does not want the girl to appear to be more vulnerable than he is. This reading of the *Composition with Crow* is supported by a related reading of *The Painter and His Model*. Here, in the only other painting in which Balthus appears with one of the girls, the suggestion of voyeurism is again avoided, now because both artist and model are clothed. Apparently, Balthus does not want the girl to be vulnerably undressed while he stands to the side with the protective covering of shirt and pants. These are not, to say the very least, the considerations of a dirty old man. Indeed, Balthus approaches his girls with a certain discretion. There is a hint of sadness, of the unbridgeable distances that separate us, one from another. Courtliness, which is an acknowledgment of distance, comes into play here. And in his courtliness Balthus recalls another lover of young girls who was a romantic in an unromantic age: George Balanchine. The pedestals are crumbling, but these men keep believing.

I don't know if it's Balthus's formal lucidity or Balthus's self-absorbed romanticism that bothers people more. By allowing his recent works to disappear into private collections before his fans have even had a chance to see them, Balthus has demonstrated his indifference to the opinion of the world. But I like to believe that by permitting this new, revised edition of Jean Leymarie's monograph, he's remembering his fans. The news that Leymarie brings is triumphant: Balthus, an artist without rival today, is painting up a storm in Switzerland.

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Dance

Don't worry, be happy

by Eva Resnikova

It is unusual, perhaps even unique, for a choreographer who started out as part of the downtown loft-theater experimental-dance scene to end up as head of the resident ballet company of one of the royal theaters of Europe; yet Mark Morris has gone from Dance Theater Workshop to the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels in less than a decade. The move was greatly mourned, and its necessity—basically financial—decried, by Morris's champions among the American dance community. But the residency in Brussels has also allowed Morris to work on an opera-house scale, one of the results of which, his setting of Handel's *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato*, was given its U.S. premiere in October as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.

Morris has by no means abandoned his downtown roots, however. Also part of the BAM season was a mixed bill which included some new works that would not have been out of place on West Nineteenth Street, though they were in fact created for a chamber touring company that the choreographer has formed with Mikhail Baryshnikov. The former *danseur noble* became a confirmed fan when, as artistic director of American Ballet Theater, he commissioned from Morris *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes*. Choreographed in Morris's quirkily inventive ballet style to rather banal piano music of Virgil Thomson, *Drink* gave the middle-aging superstar, weary of the standard repertory of ballets and the standard adulation of balletomanes, the challenge of conquering yet another new movement style, as well as the illusion, in this anonymously populated ensemble work, of being just one of the guys.

But the big event in Brooklyn was the Handel, which had already been pronounced a masterpiece by scouts who had ventured to Brussels for its premiere in 1988. Having now had the opportunity to see the work twice, in an excellent musical performance led by Nicholas McGegan, I concur in the consensus that it is a highly accomplished work, bursting with imagination and fully indicative of Morris's talents. Yet for all its skill and invention, the choreography fails to prove a match for the music or the poetry, leaving aesthetic gaps in which one becomes aware of longueurs and entire sections that are mere step-spinning. A second viewing, rather than revealing new depths, served only to confirm and widen the gaps, with the comic effects outwearing their welcome well before the music ran out and attempts at profundity resting stubbornly on the surface.

The second viewing, with a second audience, also confirmed an aspect of Morris's art that, for me, has always prevented him from being a completely serious, and satisfying, artist: his refusal, or inability, to drop his antic, bad-boy persona. As a result, when he attempts to abandon his generally ironic stance, he often fails to convince. And not only me, judging from the misplaced laughter that has been a part of every performance of Morris's work I have attended. In fact,

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Morris is the only choreographer I know of who consistently has difficulty bringing the audience with him when he switches from his comic to his serious mode—not just from one scene to another, but from one ballet to another. In the mixed bill, a slapstick throwaway to Satie was followed by Morris's setting of Brahms's *Neue Liebesliederwalzer*, and one can hardly blame the uninitiated for laughing at the dancers rolling on the floor and doing cartwheels and dragging each other around by the arm, caveman-style.

Audiences are primed to laugh at Morris's work because, like Mercutio, he is at heart an ironist (no doubt this was a strong factor in Morris's attraction for Baryshnikov, who, though he has limned all the great tragic heroes of the classical repertory, shares Morris's comic bent). And as Mercutio discovered, it is difficult to get people to take you seriously if they are used to your always kidding. Indeed, the message of Morris's *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato* is precisely the choice of Mirth over Melancholy—and Morris's statement of belief takes on added significance because it is not that of the Milton original, nor of the adaptation fashioned by Handel and his librettist, Charles Jennens.

The Italian titles of Milton's twinned poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," written in the early 1630s, admit of multiple interpretations, as is evident in the poems themselves. Melancholy is "loathed," but it is also addressed as "divinest"; Mirth is "heart-easing," but its "joys" are also described as "vain" and "deluding." Robert Burton's influential *Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621, ascribes to the word not only the sense prevalent today of sadness and depression, but also the now-obsolete, less pejorative meaning of thoughtfulness. The melancholic person was one who pondered, considered, weighed (whence the etymology of "pensive").

Thus, it is not sadness that Milton argues in favor of in "Il Penseroso" but rather the joys of the contemplative, and necessarily solitary, life. In "L'Allegro," Milton argues in favor of the carefree, unexamined life in society. Both poems are encomiums, intended to praise the pleasures to be derived from each attitude: that which takes one out of oneself and that which focuses inward. However, if length and positioning are any indication of Milton's intentions, one must note that "Il Penseroso" is longer than "L'Allegro," and, particularly significant, it gets the last word.

A century later, Handel created his musical setting of Jennens's adaptation of Milton's poems. The idea of musicalizing the poems and the concept of interspersing them both seem to have originated with Jennens. But it was, in the librettist's own words, "at Mr. Handel's request" that he created an additional poem, "to be subjoyn'd to Milton's Allegro & Penseroso, to which He [Handel] gave the Name of Il Moderato, & which united those two independent Poems in one Moral Design." Though fully consonant with eighteenth-century English rationalism, the concept of a middle way was completely at odds with what Milton had intended. In any event, "Il Moderato" did not meet with much success and was generally dropped in later performances.[1]

Two and a half centuries later, Morris has altered Milton's text far more radically than any of the poet's eighteenth-century admirers. Poor Jennens has had his wrist slapped retroactively by virtually every critic who has written about the ballet for his high-handed attitude toward Milton (as well as, wrongly, for Handel's high-handedness). While it is true that Handel and Jennens made a hash of Milton's two poems, they merely appended Jennens's "Moderato" to the result. Morris, although he uses very little of Jennens's verse, interperses the doggerel within Milton's text. But most damaging,

1 The "Moderato" section was not recorded until 1980, by John Eliot Gardiner for Musical Heritage Society. This recording thus restores to Handel's work its original tripartite construction: Part I and Part II, comprising "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" as abridged and intermingled by Jennens, and Part III, comprising Jennens's "Il Moderato."

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Morris contradicts Milton's conclusion by transposing an "Allegro" section to the end of the work, so that instead of closing with the narrator choosing to live with the "pleasures" of Melancholy, the work closes with his intention to live with the "delights" of Mirth. Moreover, Morris has performed his act of deconstruction without indicating in any way that what he is presenting is other than the Handel original, in either the playbill or the separate libretto tucked into it.

Choreographically, Morris ends this monumental work with the clichéd image of revolving concentric circles of dancers. The anticlimactic ending is perhaps not surprising, given that this happy music is not what Handel intended as the ending of his setting of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." That music is a soaring choral fugue imbued with an almost religious ecstasy. Now preceding the false Allegro conclusion, the fugue is illustrated by one of the weakest sections of choreography in the piece, involving isolated individuals and anonymous and ever-changing embracing couples.

Morris's inability to match the power of Handel's original ending, as well as his choice of concluding his piece with an image of feel-good communal love, confirm the difficulty he has always had in depicting individualized passionate emotion, which he elsewhere avoids through relentless irony and its cousin, camp. Morris's old *New Love Song Waltzes* (1982) and his new *Love Song Waltzes* (1989), which completes the Brahms cycle and received its U.S. premiere in Brooklyn, confirm his unease with this area of human relations, especially when romance and eroticism are involved. Once again, to these lushly sentimental love songs Morris has set unmotivated and arbitrary couplings. As in all of Morris's work, these couplings are accomplished without regard to gender: boys dance with boys, girls dance with girls, boys dance with girls, and all are apt to switch partners, and apparent sexual orientation, at any moment without warning. People are interchangeable, Morris seems to be saying; any warm body will do.

Morris's choice of Brahms's *Liebeslieder-walzer* was not an arbitrary one. Balanchine's settings of these songs is one of the great odes to heterosexual romantic love in the choreographic repertory. Like Balanchine, Morris has always been outspoken about his sexual preferences; one would welcome from him a similar exploration of homosexual love. Morris's admirers are always praising him for his willingness to take risks; but where is the risk in presenting, as he has in such works as *Striptease*, nudity and images from hard-core pornography on stage? In today's climate of so-called cutting-edge art, this sort of thing is practically *de rigueur*. Real risk-taking for Morris would mean leaving behind the safety net of irony and camp and exploring the implications—emotional, romantic, erotic—of the couplings he so casually depicts on stage.

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Music

Evgeny Kissin at Carnegie Hall

by Dana Mack

Anyone doubting that Evgeny Kissin's Carnegie Hall recital was indeed a big event need only have shown up at the hall as I did—ticketless, mere minutes before the houselights dimmed. The September 30 concert, which was the young Soviet pianist's North American debut, had sold out, and scores of would-be concertgoers—Russian émigrés, aging piano groupies, and music students—crowded the sidewalk, each of them scheming for a seat inside. Although some of these have-nots seemed coolly confident about getting what they wanted, there was also a swarm of manic music lovers prepared to accost anyone who might wish to part with a ticket.

Of these swarmers, I must have appeared immeasurably the most desperate—or the most gullible. I had only just posted myself near the center of action when I was approached by a couple who, in respective size and demeanor, bore a strong resemblance to those irrepressible cartoon spies, Boris and Natasha. They suggested—in thick, muted tones—that they would be willing to re-sell a freshly purchased ten-dollar seat for an even one hundred dollars.

Should I be ashamed to admit that—stepping off to the side with them—I allowed them to empty my wallet? Should I be even more ashamed that I answered honestly the Romanian émigré who, upon our breathless assumption of the rearest of rear balcony seats, asked me what I paid? When I told him, he exclaimed, "It can't *be* they were scalpers; I'm certain they were Russians!" I'm not sure which dismayed him more, their betrayal of art or of national solidarity.

The Japanese piano student in the other seat beside me overheard our conversation and inquired, "Is this true? Did you really pay so much for your ticket?" To my great relief, she knew it *had* to be true. Kissin, she informed me, had earlier that week appeared on "Good Morning, America." He had played Chopin. What could better create such a mob at the box office than a telegenic young Soviet who had already conquered the American people in their very homes, at their very breakfast tables?

Who is Evgeny Kissin, and why all the excitement? He is the latest sensation in a category of talent strangely particular to the music profession—the *Wunderkind*. A mere nineteen years of age, the Moscovian prodigy boasts an international career since 1985—one especially distinguished by a debut, in late December 1988, with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic.

Kissin has behind him tours of Eastern Europe, of Japan, and of Western Europe (the latter with the Moscow Virtuosi) and has made several recordings for such high-profile labels as Deutsche Grammophon and RCA. So promising, indeed, is his success story that BMG Classics is about to release a "Musical Portrait" of him—that is, a two-CD line-up of concerti from his recorded repertoire, which includes the war horses of

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Haydn and Mozart, Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff, Prokoviev, and Shostakovich.

Just to listen to the extramusical praise lavished on Kissin by his audience is enough to convince one that a great deal of his public appeal lies in an ingenuous physical appearance. The public candidly remarks on the lightness of his frame, the delicacy of his fingers, the grace of his movements, the youthfulness of his features. Indeed, Kissin's choirboy face, his reserved and modest demeanor, invite sympathy. However, his playing—to judge by the Carnegie concert—is less appealing. Seldom has so much natural musicality and physical agility been combined with so little originality of interpretation as in Kissin's Carnegie Hall debut.

Not that this concert, which featured staples of the Romantic piano literature, got off to a bad start. The Schumann *Abegg* Variations, in fact, were played sensitively, with a fluid, unaffected melodic emphasis. But Kissin got into some trouble with the same composer's *Symphonic Etudes.* The same straightforward, clean, and artless approach taken to the Variations could not sustain interest in the long, and very demanding, *Etudes.* Principally missing was the immediacy of Schumann's melodic inspiration. More interesting pianists achieve with this work a feeling of spontaneity in musical line which highlights its most wonderful moments. Such pianists also distinguish passages through varieties of tone color. Not so, Kissin. He managed not one memorable turn. There was, moreover, a conspicuous absence of rhythmic tension in his playing; the finale was so lacking in requisite pull that, despite the impressive loudness of its *forte*, it lacked conviction.

No more convincing was Kissin's performance of Prokofiev's Sonata no. 6, usually a rewarding showpiece for aspiring young artists. The first movement *Allegro moderato* might have been attacked with the object of bigness of sound, but here it was as flat as it was loud. The opening thirds, which should have had a harsh but directed resonance, were, under Kissin's fingers, clumsy splats of sound. The second, bittersweet theme was dry as dust, as was the second movement *Allegretto.* Most disappointing, however, was the third movement (*Waltz*), which completely lacked the schmalz essential to bringing it off. Only the last movement took off properly, with a lightness that justified the admiration with which Kissin's technical accomplishments have been showered. Still, one must wonder at the lack of empathy Kissin brought to his interpretation of a twentieth-century compatriot.

The last part of the program, devoted to Liszt, raised some hopes again. The opening melody of the famous *Liebestraume* no. 3 was beautiful; but further into the piece, a restlessness pervaded that counteracted some of the atmosphere of the first measures. The final piece on the program, Liszt's technically demanding *Rhapsodie Espagnole*, achieved its prescribed effect on many; the audience was brought to its feet at its conclusion. Indeed, Kissin packed all those notes neatly into a final *stretto.* But to what purpose? One would like to think an artist allows himself the luxury of at least a little frenzy in this marvelous work, but Kissin's iron control made his virtuoso display seem impassive and calculated.

In short, this was a debut which, though received by enthusiastic audience acclaim, featured not one moment of distinctiveness—not one instant of that impassioned daring that distinguishes the playing of a musician carried away by the beauty of the music. On the contrary, Kissin gave the impression of being a formidably gifted but woefully over-rehearsed young man.

If Kissin's mere competence as an interpreter of the keyboard literature was epitomized by an undistinguished encore rendition of the Chopin C-sharp minor Waltz, nobody in the audience seemed to notice. What accounts for this lack of discrimination on the part of the music public, which certainly has enough exposure to more individual—even eccentric—musical personalities? Is it Kissin's youth, his athletic endurance at the keyboard, his touching generosity with encores?

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These qualities do indeed make him attractive. It seems, however, that Kissin just may be the most recent arrival in a series of lithe Eastern European artist-athletes who disturbingly resemble wind-up dolls—beautiful to look at, but conspicuously dispassionate in the performance of their tasks. The reasons why the West so eagerly takes these overtrained products of the Soviet system to its bosom has no doubt more to do with politics than with art. Though the Cold War is over, such talents will continue to emerge for some time to come. They will astound us with their deliberateness, their discipline, and their cool-headedness. They will take from the West all it is willing to give them in riches and public acclaim.

As with all such prodigies, the more Kissin plays, the higher will become his audience's demands on him, and the brighter the hope that he will develop into an artist with something unique to say. That is, if he is not ruined first—by the greed of a music business eager to exploit his freakish accomplishment of childhood virtuosity, and by the ready commendation of a music public more enamored of youth and promise than of real musical accomplishment.

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Books

Arrogance and the canons of historical scholarship

by James W. Tuttleton

We owe to Nietzsche perhaps the most withering intellectual attack yet mounted on Christianity as a religious belief system. In *Beyond Good and Evil* and elsewhere, Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for the way in which Christianity, he said, taught "even the lowliest how to place themselves through piety in an illusory higher order of things and thus to maintain their contentment with the real order, in which their life is hard enough —and precisely this hardness is necessary." He wanted nothing less than to annihilate the Christian ethic—which he contemptuously dismissed as a psychology of "devotion, self-sacrifice for one's neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial . . ."

Of course Nietzsche wanted the weak sent to the wall so that the heroic man alone could dictate the values by which the mass of men live their lives. Only if the *Sklaven-moral*, or slave morality, is replaced by the *Herren-moral*, or the morality of the master, can the *Ubermensch* evolve. Christianity is an impediment to the development of the Superman.

> Christianity has been the most calamitous kind of arrogance yet. Men, not high and hard enough to have any right to try to form man as artists; men, not strong and far-sighted enough to *let* the foreground law of thousandfold failure and ruin prevail, though it cost them sublime self-conquest; men, not noble enough to see the abysmally different order of rank, chasm of rank, between man and man—*such* men have so far held sway over the fate of Europe, with their "equal before God," until finally a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, mediocre has been bred, the European of today—

The central emphasis in the Christian faith —self-sacrifice in the service of God and man—was for Nietzsche "a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation."

Nietzsche's designation of Christianity as an "arrogant" faith, the religion of "slaves," will inevitably be recalled by anyone reading Forrest G. Wood's *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century.* [1] Wood attempts nothing less than a full-scale assault on the "Christian view" of blacks. But unlike Nietzsche (who is never mentioned in this book), Wood sees Christianity as a religion of the *Herren-moral*, the faith of vicious and hypocritical bigots driven by racism alone.

That the Christian churches in America have had a troubled history in relation to questions of slavery and race will come as no surprise to anyone broadly familiar with the course of our national development, especially in the years preceding and after the Civil War. This history unfolded as it did in

1 *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century*, by Forrest G. Wood; Knopf, 517 pages, $29.95.

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part because most American Christians accepted literally the teachings of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as the divinely inspired word of God, the texts constituting God's covenants with mankind. While nearly every Christian denomination in America, in the years following the Revolution, denounced slavery as an evil, many Christians afterward found an authority in scriptural texts for the maintenance of slavery. Leviticus 25:44-46, though it established the law only for the ancient Israelites, was often taken as a warrant for the permissible and impermissible forms of American slave holding:

> Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.

Of course, New Testament practice superseded, for Christians, the Mosaic law, but even the New Testament acknowledged slavery and stipulated the moral conventions that should govern it. St. Paul, in Ephesians 6:5-8, admonishes those who are enslaved:

> Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.

Likewise the epistle to the Colossians counsels: "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven." In fact, it is fair to say that in Matthew 20:26-28 Christ commanded believers to see themselves as slaves: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (In this respect Nietzsche was more nearly right about the Christian ethic of self-sacrifice than Wood.)

These texts appear to acknowledge slavery, seem implicitly to acquiesce in it as a social institution and endorse an ethic of behavior in connection with it. Of course, there are other biblical texts that command a charity toward others incompatible with slave holding. These constituted the basis for the Northern Christian abolitionist movement and inaugurated the interpretive battles that divided Christians up to the antebellum period, when a number of Southern denominations split off from their Northern brethren and formed separate branches supporting slavery.

Another source for nineteenth-century Christian tolerance of slavery was the view of the body vs. the soul and this life vs. the next. Wood is quite right to note Christian belief in a Pauline dualism, according to which body and soul are distinct entities. Whatever the politics of the state one lived in, true freedom came, as Presbyterian James Henley Thornwell (among others) argued, from "the emancipation of the will from the power of sin." Until the *fin-de-siècle* rise of the Social Gospel, salvation was always an individual matter, not a project for the reformation of society as a whole. In a condition of grace the Christian, of whatever time and place, renders unto Caesar what he must but is in fact a citizen of the Augustinian City of God.

Perhaps the most striking formulation of this position is that by the Reverend Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein of the Dutch Reformed Church, who, in the *Dissertatio Politico-Theologica de Servitute, Libertati Christianae non Contraria* (1742), confidently preached that "slavery was not contrary to Christian freedom," a declaration that was all

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the more forceful since his parents were native-born African slaves. Spiritual freedom in Christ is thus much more desirable than bodily freedom (an illusion in any case), since therein lies the salvation of the soul.

Professor Wood has no use for this Pauline dualism of body and soul or for Christians' sometime tolerance of the peculiar institution. In fact, he has no use for Christianity at all since he sees it not as the faith of slaves but the religion of racist slave masters:

> The central thesis of this book is that Christianity, in the five centuries since its message was first carried to the peoples of the New World—and, in particular, to the natives and the transplanted Africans of English North America and the United States—has been fundamentally racist in its ideology, organization, and practice. While popes, bishops, preachers, evangelists, and missionaries proclaimed Christianity to be the ultimate solution to all of the world's problems, their celebration of that belief created and maintained one of the worst of those problems, a problem so pervasive but insidious that for a very long time many observers thought the cause of the disease was its cure.

In Wood's view the enormity of racism and slave holding was not the result of the moral blindness of Southern or Northern bigots, not the shortcoming of immoral American men and women. The criminality lay in "not just churches and communicants but, more fundamentally, [in] Christianity as a belief system." Again: "Christianity was a cornerstone of modern slavery and, *ergo*, modern racism." Finally: "English North Americans embraced slavery *because* they were Christians, not in spite of it."

These preposterous claims, advanced by a professor of history at California State University at Bakersfield, speak ill for the profession of history in the academy today. Wood justifies his slanders by invoking the requirements of scholarship:

> Since I was obliged to observe the canons of scholarship I did not have the luxury of accepting on faith an inerrant Bible and thus was left only with the premise that Christianity itself, the Way and the Word, was man-created—that man created God in his image, or, as Voltaire put it, *Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*—and, accordingly, was the source of many of the evils that Christians insisted were human corruptions.

But the canons of historical scholarship do not lead to the tendentious conclusion of which Wood is so confident—and in any case these canons are not observed in this polemical diatribe. I shall not repeat here Eugene Genovese's exposé—in *The New Republic* of August 13, 1990—of Wood's many egregious "embarrassing errors, some of them really dumb." These "howlers" may be briefly classified as misinterpreting Christian doctrine; misrepresenting historical documents; falsifying the position on slavery of many Christian ministers; caricaturing the views of other historians; getting wrong the denomination, sectional loyalty, and even nationality of historical figures; etc. These and the "sundry other atrocities" enumerated by Genovese, whose knowledge of the historical period is beyond cavil, should be enough to land Wood's book in the dustbin of botched scholarship.

What seems more worth remarking about this book, however, is the contempt it evinces for Western civilization (and the role of Christianity in its development) and its readiness to sentimentalize blacks and to exalt African culture at any price. It must be said at the outset that the African slaves brought by force to this country by the slave-traders existed in a Stone Age culture. They believed in various forms of animism, practiced the superstitious magic of voodoo, obeah, and myalism, and organized themselves according to a violent warrior code that made for more or less continuous tribal conflict. One would never get the idea from Wood's study that they conquered, bought, and sold *each other* into slavery. If the social organization of African tribes was simple by Western standards, its science was virtually

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nonexistent, its art and architecture rudimentary, its educational system primitive by any standard. Wood quotes with approval the African writer Okot p'Bitek, who complains of the readiness of Westerners to characterize Africans as "barbarian, primitive, pagan, savage, idolatrous, heathen, and superstitious." But such they seemed, it must be said, to the Americans who took them as slaves. From this condition arose the urgency of many American ministers and missionaries to educate, civilize, and convert them to the faith.

Nothing could be more risible, from the point of view of comparative cultural analysis, than Wood's attempt to exalt non-Western forms of life. Some of the following has nothing to do with the South and West African tribes who became slaves in America, but here we learn that

> the ancestors of the modern Sudanese had devised artificial street-lighting facilities. Two thousand years ago, the forefathers of the Haya people of modern Tanzania produced medium-carbon steel in preheated, forced-draft furnaces, a technique not developed in the West until the nineteenth century. The Moche people of ancient Peru, whose society flourished from A.D. 100 to 700, were wonderful architects and craftsmen who developed sophisticated metal-plating techniques fourteen centuries before the Europeans were to perfect similar skills.

To this he adds the "dazzling" accomplishment that "Twenty centuries before Christ, the citizens of Mohenjo-Daro on the Indus river in what is today Pakistan had developed an effective sewerage system." Wood wants us to think it an advantage over Christianity that "The Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert did not even have a word in their language for 'guilt.'" And he quotes approvingly Geoffrey Parrinder's *West African Religions* to the effect that the distinction between good and evil is unknown to the people of West Africa. One wonders how West Africans could have expressed their opposition to slavery without a moral vocabulary based on such a distinction. What lies beneath Wood's glorification of non-Western accomplishments, which certainly deserve their due in the history of human endeavor, is, however, a detestation of the West, which in Wood's view suffers from "ethnocentric shackles," a "cultural myopia, and its taproot was Christianity."

This detestation of his culture makes Wood stretch for any scrap of information that will assist him in caricaturing Christianity. He makes Islam, with its tradition of "holy wars" (and slave-trading), look positively beatific by comparison. If Southern clergymen sought admission to the plantations to educate, civilize, and convert the blacks to Christianity—knowing that slaveholders would deny them access if they condemned slavery—the pastors were trimmers and hypocrites. If Catholic priests and Protestant ministers inveighed against slavery by warning of its corrupting effects and of God's wrath to come, they were only concerned with the moral health of slave masters and had no compassion for the slaves themselves. Wood argues, against a mass of overwhelming evidence (some of it adduced in his own book), that the institutional involvement of Northern churches in the abolition movement was "virtually nonexistent"—this despite the abolitionist evangelism of Theodore Dwight Weld and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Presbyterians Charles Grandison Finney, Henry Ward Beecher, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the Quaker Grimké sisters, and many others. Moreover, if the Christian churches did attack slavery, Wood then shifts his ground and claims that the attack actually "obfuscated the more fundamental issue of *racism*."

Perhaps the most significant omission of this book is Wood's failure to discuss the black's relation to Christianity. He does take note of the development of separate wings of the denominations, like the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its counterparts. And not quite rightly he sees their formation as a response to the prejudice of whites who did not wish to worship with blacks, even after

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the Emancipation Proclamation. (He does not mention that many blacks wanted their own congregations, since black racism exists too.) But Wood's view of Christianity is such that he cannot explain why many congregations did have mixed audiences, or why white Christians—especially in many Baptist congregations—not only allowed blacks to become ministers but sat in the pews consenting to be preached to by them.

But more decisively, Wood's hostility to Christianity makes it utterly incomprehensible that blacks should have yielded to conversion at all or consented to bind themselves to the doctrine and practice of their faith. Any Christian, not deriving from Africa, will understand (though Wood cannot) the slave poet Phyllis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

> 'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too;
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

It is not too much to say that the black church is one of the most vital manifestations of Christianity in America today. If it were true that "Christianity was a cornerstone of modern slavery and, *ergo*, modern racism," Wood must think that black Christians are fools and the implied contempt for them is appalling to contemplate. But then the preaching of Christ crucified, as Saint Paul told the Corinthian disciples, is foolishness to those who place their faith in mere reason, science, history, and mass politics.

That said, American Christians can take no comfort in the history of their response to the great issue of black slavery and the racism that still permeates our culture. The Christian record is littered with racist hate-mongering by ignorant and well-nigh illiterate jackleg preachers, self-ordained bishops, and smug congregants—even by deliberative synods, grand conventions, educated pastors and elders ventilating their prejudices. Wood gleefully and arrogantly records these corruptions here, and it is well to have them gathered into one place for moral reflection on the Christian's readiness, in relation to others, to do that which he ought not to do and to fail to do that which he should. The history of the Christian response to slavery has its nearest modern counterpart in the division of today's believers over abortion and euthanasia. As Christians reflect on these contemporary moral dilemmas, the history of their relation to blacks—as a reflection of the power of economics, politics, and social mores to corrupt Christian belief—should be sobering.

Want list

Robert Pinsky The Want Bone.
The Ecco Press, 70 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

The Want Bone, Robert Pinsky's fourth volume of poems, marks a departure for the fifty-year-old poet. Where his earlier poems are mostly occasional pieces dealing with the paraphernalia of everyday life—tennis, psychiatrists, and scenes from Pinsky's hometown on the New Jersey shore are typical subjects—the poems collected here all explore a single theme, the theme of desire. Ranging widely over the field of human yearning, Pinsky writes of what it is to *want.* He is fascinated by the ardent source of our endeavors—the "glittering / Zodiac of intentions" that animates everything we do. Pinsky's earlier collections—*Sadness and Happiness* (1975), *An Explanation of America* (1979), and *History of My Heart* (1984)—were not bound together thematically in this way.

Yet however governed *The Want Bone* is by the theme of desire—and however much Pinsky illustrates his theme with religious and mythical imagery, also new terrain for him—most of the poems here have an admirably concrete and immediate feel. In the poem "Shirt," for example, what Pinsky offers us is a catalogue of tangible attributes of this ordinary object. The result is a poem very much like a Pinsky poem of old:

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The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or
Malaysians

Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break
Or talking money or politics while one fitted
This armpiece with its overseam to the band

Of cuff I button at my wrist. The presser,
the cutter,
The wringer, the mangle. The needle,
the union,
The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The
infamous blaze

At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.
One hundred and forty-six died in the flames
On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire
escapes—

Pinsky's unglamorized celebration of shirts extends from the things essential to the shirt's fabrication—needle, bobbin, seam—to the people: pressers, cutters, weavers, spinners. For Pinsky, who has long distrusted symbols, *naming* is often the poetic device of choice. To name is to honor: to distinguish, to single out "the shape, [t]he label, the labor" of something we might otherwise take for granted.

But "Shirt" is not just a celebration of minutiae. At the heart of the poem is Pinsky's evocation of a gruesome historical event: the Triangle Shirt Fire of 1911 in which 146 workers died—"[o]n the ninth floor" where there were "no hydrants, no fire escapes." Pinsky's terrifying description of this tragedy is part of his attempt to assess the shirt's "cost and quality"—an assessment that must also take into account the owner's desires and greed, which (Pinsky implies) helped spark the blaze.

All the same, "Shirt" is not an occasion for disapproval and denunciation. Far from it: Pinsky's ultimate goal is not to render a judgment but to reveal the awesome complexity of a simple thing. He wants us to view the shirt as a kind of meeting-place of a host of worthy and unworthy ambitions, not only those of the factory owner, but of the planters, pickers, inspectors, and wearers, as well. While Pinsky suggests that technical inventiveness and ingenuity may be the handmaidens of death, this is not his sole or even his chief objective.

In "The Refinery," Pinsky considers the modern-day sprawl of tanks, pipes, and valves where crude oil is converted into fuel. Pinsky imagines the old gods—"Thirsty and languorous after their long black sleep"—returning to the earth to visit one of these clanking and wheezing contrivances. What the drowsy gods find is "a palace on the water," an

impossible city of lights,
A million bulbs tracing its turreted
Boulevards and mazes. The castle of a person
Pronounced alive, the Corporation: a fictional
Lord real in law.

Barbicans and torches
Along the siding where the engine slows
At the central tanks, a ward
Of steel palisades, valved and chandeliered.

The muttering gods
Greedily penetrate those bright pavilions—
Libation of Benzene, Naphthalene, Asphalt,
Gasoline, Tar: syllables
Fractioned and cracked from unarticulated

Crude, the smeared keep of life that fed
On itself in pitchy darkness when the gods
Were new—inedible, volatile
And sublimated afresh to sting
Those who use it, refined from oil of stone.

Here, too, Pinsky is curious about what exactly inspired the maker of this surreal "palace." He envisions its creator lurking in the bowels of some sleek, carpeted, Kafkaesque "Corporation." And yet, Pinsky doesn't condemn the shadowy "Lord" of the refinery. Instead he draws a clever parallel between the making of language—itself a centuries-long process of distillation—and the refiners' wresting of useful oil from crude: "syllables / Fractioned and cracked,"

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he writes, "from unarticulated / Crude." Pinsky in effect asks us to view the refinery (and its maker) with a degree of sympathy. When the gods stroll down the "bright pavilions" of the refinery, they do not find dark proof of rampant human greed. What the gods do come upon is the logical outcome of their having saturated the earth, so many eons ago, with all that "unarticulated [c]rude." Just as the grunts of primates were fated to evolve into language, so was all that crude destined to be made into fuel. In each case, a price must be paid: in the world of language, the slush pile of bad writing; in a world thirsty for fuel, impurities discharged into the sea and land.

"The Refinery" reminds one of a comment made by the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, whose poems Pinsky has helped translate. In his 1982 book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, Milosz writes that "Technology was not born from nothing. It recapitulates all the savagery, all the ruthlessness of the struggle for survival, and contains enormous human virtue as well." This recapitulation of ruthlessness and virtue, encouraged by a legion of spoken and unspoken desires, and played out in terms of technological advancement, is Pinsky's fertile subject-matter in "The Refinery" and "Shirt."

On the verso of his first book of poems, *Sadness and Happiness*, Pinsky noted his propensity as a poet to use "statement as a way to get at the profoundly emotional, obsessive side of supposedly ordinary activities as playing tennis or watching passers-by from a parked car." Although the bulk of the poems in *The Want Bone* are governed by a single overarching idea, they are still very much in line with Pinsky's earlier work in the way that they "get at" the "obsessive side" of unprepossessing activities and objects.

In one important respect, however, the poems of *The Want Bone* are quite unlike Pinsky's previous work. This is in the writing itself. The lines in many of Pinsky's new poems are lush and abundant, quite unlike the prose-like and unadorned style he favored in earlier poems. In the final stanza of the title poem, Pinsky attains such a degree of vigor and intensity that he is compelled to dispense with punctuation. Reflecting on the want bone—the shark's dried jaw bones that even in their lifeless state seem to mouth a ballad of desire—Pinsky writes in an altogether new fashion:

> The beach scrubbed and etched and pickled it clean.
> But O I love you it sings, my little my country
> My food my parent my child I want you my own
> My flower my fin my life my lightness my O.

For a poet who has believed that poetic language should be flat and uninspired, this is a heartening step. When Pinsky wrote, in an early poem, "I stand here now / At the corner of Third Avenue and Broadway / Waiting for you to come by in a car," he was declaring his bias not just for a poetry of *place*, but for one written in a rudimentary language as well. *The Want Bone* represents a richer, more variegated conception of poetry's resources.

The demand that poetry favor rudimentary language and syntax is something that Pinsky gleaned, at least in part, from Donald Davie, the English poet-critic who was his teacher. As a critic, Davie has advocated the civic-minded English poets of the eighteenth century over the supposedly anti-social Romantics of the nineteenth. While this attitude may encourage social responsiblity, it can also hinder the imagination and beget an intolerance for fanciful subject-matter.

Pinsky himself has been able to surmount some of the risks inherent in this idea of a "civic" poetry. He has done so, in part, by concentrating on what he calls the "obsessive side" of things. In poems like "Shirt" and "The Refinery," for example, his imagination is kindled by an untiring inquiry into the genesis or source of everyday objects. These elaborately wrought poems succeed even while fulfilling one of Pinsky's earlier precepts: that the poet keep his eye fixed on the observable world.

One thing, however, that Pinsky might consider indulging a bit less is his penchant

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for poems based on religion and myth. With the possible exception of "From the Childhood of Jesus," *The Want Bone*'s opening poem, his poems that feature these themes seem a little off the mark. Peopled by the likes of Shiva and Parvati (Hindu gods), Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, Tristram and Isolt, they distract the reader from the germane moral and aesthetic issues with a host of imported, exotic personalities. In the prose piece entitled "Jesus and Isolt," for example, Pinsky contrasts the Jewish soul of Jesus —pragmatic, ethical—with the heedless and destructive love of Tristram and Isolt. Jesus is captivated by Tristram's reckless courage in battle, and by Isolt's equally foolhardy love for Tristram. (All this recalls, of course, Isaac Babel, the pacific, intellectual Jew who was so mesmerized by the lawless fury of the Cossacks that he joined their ranks.) Doubtless this is good material. One wishes that Pinsky had, like Babel, filtered his ideas, and the emotions that accompany them, not necessarily through his own experience, but through experiences that are closer to us.

Happily, Pinsky's new collection doesn't suffer all that much from the inclusion of these poems. *The Want Bone* is, overall, an exceptionally rewarding book.

Photo story

Jim Hughes W. Eugene Smith: Shadow and Substance: The Life and Work of an American Photographer. McGraw-Hill, 606 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Richard B. Woodward

W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) may not be the most impossible character in the history of American photojournalism, but he is definitely a contender. In a profession that attracts more than its share of obstinate, hot-tempered idealists, he holds the record for firings and rehirings, dramatic resignations from magazines and guilds, unpaid electricity bills, evictions, and emotional I.O.U.s. At the same time, his perfectionism drove him to make some of the most reproduced images of the twentieth century—testaments to the victims of war, madness, and industrial disaster; suites of photographs that told stories about quiet heroism in out-of-the-way places. As his colleague Arnold Newman said of Smith: "He's crazy, but he's great."

How crazy, lonely, manipulative, gripped by demons he remained throughout his life was not known before this new biography by Jim Hughes. For those photographers and critics who have installed Smith as a selfless crusader and a martyr to corporate journalism—and some continue to do so—Hughes's accounts of his behavior as husband, father, friend, and employee will be eye-opening. Rampant independence masked a terrible neediness in Smith; he answered any rift in friendship with the threat of suicide. Keeping himself going with large doses of alcohol and Dexedrine, he was unable to give up control to anyone, especially to editors, publishers, and curators, most of whom only wanted to help him realize ambitious projects. Given the freedom to work unhindered by financial constraints, Smith more often than not still couldn't deliver.

Upon reading the many eyewitness reports here of Smith's unreliable behavior, as well as his own agonizing letters, one wonders how he got anything done living in such an overexcited state. But, as Hughes discovered, Smith's personal problems did not interfere with picture-taking. He shot constantly and saved everything. Toward the end of his life, he shipped his possessions to the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, which now owns forty-four thousand pounds of Smith material: cameras, writings, thousands of prints and negatives, recordings, darkroom and woodworking tools, a locker and an old refrigerator.

Hughes, a former magazine editor who worked closely with Smith toward the end of his life, spent ten years sifting through this mass and rounding out his understanding of Smith through hundreds of interviews and other research. He has produced a biography that must be admired for its meticulous

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labor. But he takes it for granted that his audience shares his insatiable appeitite for Smith's manic ups and downs, a mistake compounded by his failure to make any tough critical judgments about the artistic legacy of his subject. While Hughes manages to bring to life Smith's concentration at work (silent, looking, shifting slowly like a crane or a Japanese dancer), he never makes clear how Smith developed his pictorial style—the dense chiaroscuro, the "Rembrandt" lighting—or where Smith fits into the pantheon of photographers. Smith's greatness will elude most readers who plow through this mammoth book.

Photography and music—he often equated the two—were Smith's whole life. He discovered both as a boy, and received his first camera at age eleven; he set up a darkroom in the family kitchen and built an enlarger with help from an uncle and an article in *Popular Mechanics*. The best parts of Hughes's book are the early chapters about Smith's childhood—a Norman Rockwell painting set in Wichita, Kansas. As a teenager, Smith quickly became an accomplished news photographer, his work showing up regularly in the *Wichita Eagle*. He earned the nickname "Flash" for his annoying, blinding use of the flashgun. Hughes finds evidence that, without models or forebears, Smith even then had higher aspirations for himself. At the age of sixteen, he wrote in an album next to a photograph of a flower, "Gene Smith, artist."

This Middle American idyll came to an abrupt end with his father's suicide in 1936. The Depression wiped out several risky investments that had given the family a measure of prosperity. The suicide note advised Gene to save money, a skill he never acquired or even attempted to acquire. In 1938, after a semester at Notre Dame, he left for New York and found work as a part-time staff photographer for *News-Week* magazine; a year later he arranged a similar deal with *Life*, then only a few years old but already one of the most prestigious showcases for photojournalists. He was barely twenty.

Coming of age during the boom in American picture magazines, Smith had ready outlets for his main interest as an artist: people in action. He did plenty of celebrity, day-in-the-life, and little-guy stories. Hughes finds instances of "simulation" in these staged routines of men and women at work, a practice Smith later deplored. But as an ambitious professional, he wanted to test himself with the ultimate assignment: World War II. In 1942 he boarded a troop ship for the Pacific theater, along with his phonograph, record collection, and hundreds of pounds of lights, cameras, and lenses. In his weighted-down style, Smith worked more like a movie director on location than a light-footed freelancer.

War scarred Smith forever. Even before a mortar attack on Okinawa badly wounded him in 1945, he responded internally to the carnage he saw during the assaults on Saipan and Guam. Frail, unfit for service due to bad eyes and a broken eardrum, Smith sensed that the suffering and redemption that he witnessed daily offered some sort of personal revelation. He was ashamed that his photographs had "missed the war": that they didn't correspond to the transformation in his soul.

The book is mute about Smith's religious upbringing and formative reading (Shelley, Emerson, Schweitzer would be my guess), peculiar omissions in light of the minutiae that clogs the narrative. Smith's writings are imbued with the flowery language of spiritual torment. His letters, quoted here at exhaustive length, reveal an observant, empathetic man obsessed with his mission. He was less afraid of the bullets than of "losing his way" as an artist. Some shipmates thought that beneath Smith's daring—his need to be as close to the action as possible—was a death wish.

Hughes does not psychoanalyze Smith, but he piles up enough evidence to balance some of his subject's own overdramatic readings of himself. The crucial figure in his life—according to most witnesses—was his mother, who acted as booster, girl Friday (she often carried his equipment when he went on assignment), and indomitable to-

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tem of the American prairie. She lived with him for almost ten years after he had married Carmen Martinez, ruining any chance they had for normal family life. But it was his mother who put a camera back in Smith's hands after his near-fatal war wound had killed any desire for photography. She effectively forced him to take pictures again.

Smith's fame rests on the more than fifty photo-essays he undertook between 1948 and 1972, after his recovery. In stories such as "Country Doctor," "Life Without Germs," "Spanish Village," "Nurse Midwife," "Labyrinthian Walk" (a Piranesian view of Pittsburgh), and "Minamata" (on the gruesome effects of chemical wastes on a Japanese fishing village), he produced outstanding pictures that also made sense in sequence.

Still photographs, even in sequence, do not tell stories well. Smith thought hard about how to solve this problem, and how to talk about success when a photo essay approached it. The notes and rests of a musical line became his favorite analogy for the way that an array of photos can create momentum across the pages of a magazine or book. "Country Doctor" and "Nurse Midwife" are perhaps the best examples of this from Smith's own work, because each documents a task from beginning to end. The protagonists of these essays are portrayed as ordinary, their jobs routine, yet at the same time Smith shows that to go about your business in remote locales requires heroic resolve.

Smith was a better photographer than Margaret Bourke-White, Alfred Eisenstadt, and Robert Capa, colleagues at *Life* who lacked his deeply self-critical approach. He never openly courted money or celebrity, retreating instead to his Sixth Avenue loft to brood on his theories. He could also be unbearably self-righteous. After years of stormy, tearful fights with *Life*, he left the magazine in the Fifties rather than submit to control of his layouts. His resignation letter became a performance piece he would read to his students at the New School for Social Research—his lesson in integrity. There is no question that *Life* always played it safe and middlebrow. But Smith was impossibly demanding, personally as well as professionally, and, in his search for purity, he somewhere along the way managed to abandon his wife and children.

Despite his courageous aims for photography, Smith's reliance on melodramatic lighting and his penchant for seeking out recognizable "types" usually casts his work in a sentimentally humanist mold, much closer to *Life*'s idea of itself than he liked to think. The characters in his pictures act out a drama that he understands, even if they remain unaware of the larger significance he wants to bring to their lives. They're prisoners of his "vision," denied a lively freedom of their own.

Smith's work was intended to be uplifting; at its worst it was also condescending. Hughes has a funny description of Smith photographing Albert Schweitzer in Africa. The doctor had been a hero of Smith's until the two butted heads over the issue of artistic control. Schweitzer wanted only posed shots, afraid that he might be caught looking less than kindly toward the patients in his care. As Hughes implies, both men were caught up in myths about themselves. Smith went away crushed and disillusioned about the great healer and fellow Bach devotee.

By the late Sixties Smith was out-of-step with the new documentary style of Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. "He represented what we wanted to get away from," Friedlander has said. It's a shock to realize that Smith was only five years older than Diane Arbus, six years older than Robert Frank. His style looks decades older than theirs.

The meaning of Smith's photographs could be grasped instantly by anyone. It was usually clear why they were taken. Steichen used four of Smith's pictures in his "Family of Man" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. For the concluding image of the show, and of the best-selling book based on it, Steichen chose *The Walk to Paradise Garden,* Smith's 1946 image of his two children walking into the light, probably the most famous (and mawkish) photograph of

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his career. Through posters and greeting cards it has become an American icon. Hughes documents that it also had healing power for Smith, recovering from his psychic shattering during the war.

By the end of his life Smith had become a legend, his mystique enhanced through inactivity; his absence from the magazines was explained by talk that he was now devoting himself to his "Big Book," a "total statement" on his life in photography, never completed. His 1969 retrospective at the Jewish Museum was immense and chaotic; the nearly six hundred prints—installed by Smith and his band of assistants only hours before the opening and mounted every which way on the walls—made up probably the largest one-man show ever devoted to a photographer in the U.S.

Smith's work didn't really fit into the popular magazines or the museums in his later years; it was too extravagant for the former, not daring enough for the latter. By the time of his death in 1978, a photography market existed with galleries mounting regular exhibitions. But Smith would give up only a few prints to his dealer Lee Witkin. Hughes does a good job at showing how Smith's need for control governed every aspect of his life and career, usually to his detriment.

As he grew older, Smith asked more of photography than ever before. It had to make a humanistic statement; it couldn't just present the facts. He had a motto that defied modernism's claims of formal disinterest: "Facts just do not tell truth without poetry and drama." He scorned the idea of objectivity, contrasting it with what he called "honesty." Were he more concerned with the process of exposing the hidden agenda within supposedly neutral pictures, his work would vibrate to the Zeitgeist of the late Eighties, as political art has staged a comeback.

The heroic statue of Smith, created by himself and his admirers, has long needed a more realistic base. This book provides one without trashing Smith's life. Hughes has a pained, exasperated respect for this self-made American artist. Smith's hard-won answers to the problems of photojournalism—a shaky and compromised endeavor—have inspired numerous contemporaries, from Mary Ellen Mark to James Nachtwey. Smith felt the pressure, as few photographers do, to take great pictures all the time. This biography spells out in dramatic fashion the romantic energy that can go into this mechanical art. If Smith often tripped himself up, he did so not out of laziness or cynicism but by putting more weight on photography than either he or it could bear.

Under African eyes

Chinua Achebe Hopes & Impediments: Selected Essays. Doubleday, 186 pages, $17.95; $9.95 paper

reviewed by Carol Iannone

As a novelist, the prominent Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe is known for a number of absorbing novels about his country, notably *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964). As a critic, he is probably, and unfortunately, best known as the writer of an angry critique of Joseph Conrad's famed novella of Africa *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Achebe's attack, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," was first given as a talk at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1975; in revised form it is now the lead piece in *Hopes and Impediments*, his selection from twenty-five years' worth of essays. In it, he judges *Heart of Darkness* to be irredeemably racist, and insists therefore that it should no longer be accorded its customary status "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language," in the words of one critic. In another essay, Achebe summarizes his views even more aggressively: "I have no doubt that the reason for the high standing of this novel is simply that it fortifies racial fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all."

Achebe has apparently succeeded in

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qualifying the critical appreciation of the Conrad work, at least to a degree. His essay was included, along with three responses (one a strong endorsement of his position, one an embarrassingly weak dissent, and one a fairly reasonable in-between), in the 1988 Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*. According to the editor, Robert Kimbrough, Achebe's revaluation forms one of the three most important events in *Heart of Darkness* criticism since the second Norton edition of 1963 (the other two being the film *Apocalypse Now* and the publication of Ian Watt's *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*). All of this is regrettable, and not only for the injustice being done to Conrad. Achebe's essay is utterly beneath him—narrow, intemperate, crabby, obtuse, tendentious, prescriptive—all in all, at odds not only with his expansive novels but with the whole tone of much of his other critical work as well, as manifest in many of the other essays in *Hopes and Impediments*.

In a different time, "An Image of Africa" might have served as a sort of model in how not to do literary criticism, but nowadays its methodology has become quite typical. Basically, Achebe takes out of context all of the passages in Conrad that do not reflect the special type of deference now demanded in any treatment of race, and leaps from these to totally, breathtakingly erroneous (and obviously preconceived) conclusions about Conrad's aesthetic intentions. Undeniably, Conrad's descriptions and choice of vocabulary mark him as a man of his time, but anyone with even a high-school recollection of the novel will cringe to hear it associated with "the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe . . . in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Europe in a "state of spiritual grace" is of course the opposite of what Conrad actually depicts in the novel; instead he evokes the hypocrisy, greed, cruelty, crassness, pettiness, and grandiosity behind the idealism that was often invoked to justify African colonialism. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz," Conrad's narrator Marlow says of the man who came to the Congo full of high-minded intentions but turned out to be "hollow at the core." Even further, part of the novel's specific literary effect lies in its cumulative reversal of the usual stereotypes of white/black—good/evil, as Conrad overwhelms us with blinding white fogs, whited sepulchers, the cursed ivory prized by the rapacious European "pilgrims," and the pale, ashy visage of Kurtz's deluded "Intended."

For Achebe, however, Conrad can simply do no right. His portrayal of the primitiveness of the natives prompts Achebe to insist that "these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band," as if Conrad were responsible for rendering a complete sociological and demographic portrait of the Congo at that time. But Achebe is also furious at any attempt by Conrad to show understanding or sympathy or even admiration. Marlow's acceptance of some of the natives' straightforward savagery—as opposed to the profound and demented corruption he sees in Kurtz—constitutes condescension; his pity for those natives especially brutalized by King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa is "bleeding heart" sentimentality; his admiration for Kurtz's magnificent African mistress is only preparation for an invidious comparison of her to the Intended (simply untrue—if anything, the reverse). And then to the possible rejoinder that the book is really less about Africa than about Europe anyway, Achebe waxes, "Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?" Of course it is decidedly *not* one petty European mind that concerns Conrad ("All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz"), but, even further, Achebe is so blinded by prejudgment that he doesn't seem to see that the "heart of darkness" is finally not Africa nor even Europe at all, but the wilderness within every human soul.

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Achebe's fundamental objection is that Conrad "sidestep[s] the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people," and denies the basic humanity of blacks. But although the racial issue is not Conrad's major focus, he does indeed have Marlow acknowledge the common humanity he shares with the natives. This seems to be insufficient for Achebe, however, because it involves Marlow's also having to see what makes them different from himself. Achebe's essay thus raises two important and related questions regarding the creation of literature and the practice of literary criticism today. First, as Bernard Lewis pointed out in a recent issue of *The American Scholar*, some formerly subjugated people feel that they should be able to dictate the terms in which their histories are now seen. For a beneficent example of the Western use of the idea of Africa, Achebe adduces the inspiration derived from primitive art by Picasso and others. While this is certainly a true and valid observation, Africa, like everywhere after all, has its dark elements too and these seemed to be part of Conrad's experience there. History does not always yield up "positive images" by today's standards and nobody's historical closet is without its skeletons.

This leads us to the second and related issue at question here—that of artistic freedom. With all the fuss being made in the artistic community today over the putative problem of government censorship, comparatively little is said of the much more fundamental kind of censorship being wielded in much of our literary criticism. As the critic for *The Christian Science Monitor* carefully put it in a review of *Hopes and Impediments*, "few critics, including Achebe, have yet discussed the conflict between a writer's responsibility to avoid racial and ethnic slurs and the natural tendency to draw on a pool of cultural assumptions that seem to provide vivid, concrete symbols for abstract concepts and conditions, as when someone like Thomas Mann uses North and South to represent the temperamental contrast between the cool-headed businessman and the warm-blooded aesthete."

The real question being sidestepped here, then, is the artist's right to use certain aspects and configurations of reality as symbols and metaphors for deeper states of awareness, discovery, connection, and continuity. And Achebe himself sidesteps the issue by simplifying it. In another of the essays in *Hopes and Impediments*, he enumerates a list of attitudes that he feels should be forbidden an artist: "Belief in superior and inferior races; belief that some people who live across our frontiers or speak a different language from ourselves are the cause of all the trouble in the world, or that our own particular group or class or caste has a right to certain things which are denied to others; the belief that men are superior to women, and so on." On the surface there may seem little to disagree with in this list, but nowadays a great deal of territory lies between, for example, the belief that men are superior to women on the one hand and the adoption of the many feminist-inflicted attitudes toward the sexes on the other. An artist's view of these realities may not be completely *au courant* and politically correct. Or, what may seem to be a politically desirable view may not be really very true to life as it is lived and perceived by ordinary people, and, moreover, attitudes that now seem so self-evidently righteous may one day make us wince at their blind presumptuousness.[1]

In fact, *Heart of Darkness* is itself a caution to progressive idealism. Kurtz's attitudes before he went into the jungle were quite "enlightened" for his time. While many of his fellow Belgians descended upon the Congo out of the basest desire for gain, and treated the natives with the utmost brutality ("Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way"), Kurtz was driven, if not solely at least partly, by

1 Achebe's own work isn't served by this kind of political approach either. A new full-length study, *Chinua Achebe*, by C. L. Innes (Cambridge University Press, 210 pages, $34.50), makes Achebe's novels appear to be little more than a Third World response to European novelists of Africa and a Third World chorus of politically correct views.

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"moral ideas." He was "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress," a charismatic, poetry-loving altruist who inspired loyalty and admiration. But his abstract and superficial idealism proved insufficient to resist the "many powers of darkness" that "claimed him for their own" once he was cut loose from the moorings of his civilization.

So far from endorsing racism, Conrad is quite in agreement with Achebe: perhaps the most fundamental of Kurtz's mistakes was in presuming upon a sense of superiority to the natives. Marlow detects an ominous note in an otherwise eloquent and enthusiastic report Kurtz wrote early in his stay in the jungle for the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [the savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity.'" But even beyond any issue of race, the ultimate revelation of *Heart of Darkness* may be of the capacity for disastrous self-deception inherent in the promotion of grand ideas. A certain dangerous, unacknowledged arrogance lurks behind Kurtz's noble "plans": "By the simple exercise of our will," the report continues in a somewhat chilling, Nietzchean vein, "we can exert a power for good practically unbounded." Ironically, however, after the passage of time, Kurtz's "nerves went wrong and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which . . . were offered up to him . . . to Mr. Kurtz himself." A later postscript to his report reads, "Exterminate all the brutes!" and Kurtz's last words are the famous "The horror! The horror!"

Preoccupation with topical concerns, even those that are worthy, can cause us to miss the richness of insight available in literature, especially literature of the past. In a splendid defense of the importance of literature to society, Achebe himself speaks of the "imaginative identification" by which we become "beneficiaries" of the "regenerative adventure" of literature "without having to undergo personally the ordeals" therein depicted. "[T]hink how many aeons of history will be needed to distil the wisdom of Shakespeare's *King Lear*," he ponders. Just so, if we repudiate the wisdom of *Heart of Darkness* because its rhetoric does not conform to current standards of racial sensitivity, we will have to relearn its painful lessons in some other way. In fact, Achebe's own well-intentioned proposal to heal the wounds of Africa "with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better," may be flirting with the kind of supposedly benign superiority of one group over another that *Heart of Darkness* deplores.

But for all his criticism of Conrad, Achebe's overall views of literature put him more in the company of, say, Matthew Arnold, than of, say, Stanley Fish or the black American critic Houston Baker. Perhaps because he is an African writer, not cushioned by the deceptive comforts of the West, Achebe has no margin for the hateful silliness of deconstruction or for the litanous denunciations of "white male literary supremacism" so common today. Achebe has instead been deeply nourished by literature, and his criticism is studded with insightful references not only to Arnold, but to Trilling, Eliot, Frost, Auden, Orwell, and others, not to mention the Bible. (Indeed, the titles of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are taken from Yeats and Eliot respectively.) He has absorbed from both Western and native African culture a sense of the importance of literature and narrative to the proper functioning of society, and he often seeks parallels between the two.

Unashamedly, Achebe endorses the power of the word and the importance of language in the advance of consciousness and civilization. "[I]n the creation myth of the Hebrews," he reminds us, "God made the world by word of mouth; and in the Christian myth as recorded in St. John's Gospel the Word became God Himself." And he adds that "African societies in the past held similar notions about language and the

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potency of words." This belief in the power of the word is the basis for Achebe's emphasis on the importance of literature in a technological age, as well as his insistence that not all of Africa's problems can be solved through technological advancement. Such ringing statements as the following assert the importance of shared basic values to human survival and also form a stinging rebuke to the casual relativism within Western society today:

> For a society to function smoothly and effectively its members must share certain basic tenets of belief and norms of behaviour. There must be a reasonable degree of consensus on what is meant by virtue and vice; there must be some agreement on the attributes of a hero, on what constitutes the heroic act. Different societies will not hold identical ideas on these questions in every part of the world or at every time in history. And yet, in spite of local and historical variations, we do not know of any society which has survived and flourished on totally arbitrary notions of good and evil, or of the heroic and the cowardly. Our very humanity seems to be committed to a distinction between these pairs however fuzzy the line may sometimes appear.

And, Achebe continues in startling contrast to those who see literature as nothing but "texts": "The great virtue of literary fiction" is that it enables us to "locate again the line between the heroic and the cowardly when it seems most shadowy and elusive, and it does this by forcing us to encounter the heroic and the cowardly in our own psyche."

Given Achebe's seriousness about the vital importance of literature to society, it is understandable that he also sometimes separates Africa from the West in an attempt to define the type of literature that will uniquely serve the African people as Homer served the Greeks, or the Old Testament the Hebrews, or *Beowulf* the ancient Anglo-Saxons. His repudiation of "all these [literary] prescriptions and proscriptions, all these dogmas about the universal and the eternal verities; all this proselytizing for European literary fashions," has an entirely different ring from the plaint of those who are clearly motivated by nothing but politics. Achebe also rightly censors those unthinking readers who instruct him to "write about people in general, instead of just Africans," and he wonders if "the dogma of universality" means that "before I write about a problem in Nigeria, I have to make sure they have it in New York too?"

But some of Achebe's efforts to distinguish African from Western art present interesting questions about literature in the modern world. Achebe tends to see the literature of the West solely in terms of its more recent modernist manifestations—"the view," for example "of society and of culture as a prisonhouse from which the individual must escape in order to find space and fulfillment." He advances what he sees as a more particularly African model in which the artist is a willing member of his society rather than a rebel against it. He further argues against the luxury of art-for-art's-sake and insists that the African writer should not be afraid to present a moral vision and a coherent view of society even in the face of charges of "juvenile earnestness" from "mature people."

On the one hand, one sympathizes with Achebe for abjuring the increasing rarifications and attenuations of contemporary Western art. His own wonderful first novels return to English literature some of the sweet simplicity and sincerity of narrative it once possessed. On the other hand, one wonders if any artist anywhere today can escape entirely the challenges of modernity, onerous as they sometimes are. Take, for example, the representation of sex in literature. In Achebe's first novels from the Fifties and early Sixties, based largely in tribal Africa, sex is a quiet, unobtrusive element in a chaste polygamous order; but when he moves into more recent times and must portray young Nigerians living a modern life in the city separated from their tribes, as in *Anthills of the Savannah*, written years later in 1987, sex suddenly takes on the semi-apocalyptic (and deluded) character it has in much modern

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Western fiction. Also, *Anthills of the Savannah* experiments with different points of view in what seems to be an effort to deal with the fragmented, even shattered nature of Nigerian life thirty years after independence. Achebe may have to work his way to a proper and satisfactory embodiment of the many facets of contemporary Africa in literature, and he may be more of a modernist than he thinks. Be that as it may, Chinua Achebe's unapologetic belief in the power of the fictive act and of the moral dimension of the literary imagination is a tonic for the West come straight from the heart of Africa.

Shorter notices

Guy Davenport The Drummer of the Eleventh North Devonshire Fusiliers. North Point Press, 137 pages, $19.95

We live in what might be called the Age of Doctorow, when to consider the role of ideas in American fiction is to think largely of novels built around modish, crudely conceived, and aesthetically unassimilated sociopolitical notions—novels that, far from challenging a reader to ponder his preconceptions about anything, offer those who share the author's biases an opportunity for self-congratulation. In such an era, one particularly esteems a writer like Guy Davenport, who differs from his more representative colleagues in that he is a formidable intellectual, in that the artist in his fiction is generally the master of the man of ideas, and in that those ideas are more than superficially provocative.

It might be said of Davenport, as someone in his new collection observes of Auden's *Letters from Iceland*, that he practices "a species of writing where any and everything fits in." This is not to suggest that there is anything haphazard about the structure or contents of Davenport's stories, but simply to note that he manages, within a rigorously contrived design, to incorporate a wide range of materials, and to write a prose that is at once lush—drawing liberally on obscure and foreign locutions—and fastidious. Though three of the four stories here are brief, slight, and relatively straightforward narratives, the principal offering, a novella entitled "*Wo es war, soll ich werden*" (which concludes a trilogy begun with "Apples and Pears" and *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*), is typical of his longer works in that the sections carrying the story forward are separated by passages focusing variously on thematically relevant historical data, philosophical postulates, natural phenomena, and so forth.

Like several stories in *Verne* (1987), "*Wo es war*"—whose title comes from Freud: "Where it (id) was, I (ego) must become"—takes us to a Danish boarding school and manifests a preoccupation with sex (most of it homoerotic, all of it rendered idyllically) that may unsettle some readers. But Davenport, who decries hedonism and celebrates seriousness and responsibility, does not seek merely to titillate. If he accentuates sex, it is largely because he connects sexual openness to an openness to the world: we are all bodies, a character notes, and "[o]ur knowledge of what's other is a knowledge of our body." Davenport has long been fascinated by utopian arrangements for living and loving, ranging from celibate Shaker communities to randy Fourieristic phalansteries, and an education in love and sex is an integral part of his vision of exemplary schooling, of "*une enfance différente*" in which emotional and sensual growth are as important as learning history and the classics. Yet if utopias figure prominently in his work, it is not because he seeks to score simplistic points against the reigning social order but because the idea of utopia provides him with a useful framework for a complex inquiry into the nature of human ideals and aspirations—and, one might add, into the eternal tensions between love and war, closeness and distance, the divine and the mundane, the animal and the human.

To be sure, Davenport's new book has its shortcomings, one of them being that its title (which refers to an actual historical figure, a teenage boy executed by the British Army in 1811 for carnal knowledge of an ensign) points to Davenport's unrealistic tendency

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to hold the state—*any* state—ultimately responsible for cruelty and intolerance, and to act as if the failings of governments did not flow directly out of the imperfections of human nature. At times, indeed—despite his attention to the problem of evil, and his awareness that his characters represent a moral, cerebral, physical, and socioeconomic elite—Davenport does appear to take an overly rosy view of the possibilities of human society. To note such limitations, however, is not to deny the force of Davenport's vision, the splendor of his prose, or the exceptional value of his contribution to American letters.

—Bruce Bawer

Carter Wiseman I.M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture. Abrams, 320 pages, $49.50

Among the depressingly small number of practicing architects whose work is likely to outlive the fads—Postmodernism, Deconstructivism—that have plagued the profession over the last fifteen years, the name of I. M. Pei must figure prominently. Born to a eminent family in China in 1917, Ieoh Ming Pei came to this country in the Thirties. His architectural education took place primarily at M.I.T. and Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he studied with Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and for five decades he has been unswervingly committed to the rigorous tradition of High Modernism that they helped to propagate. The John Hancock Tower (1966-1976) in Boston, the East Building of the National Gallery (1968-1978) in Washington, D.C., the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center (1979-1986) in New York, the seventy-one-foot-tall glass pyramid and supporting structures at the Louvre (1983-1989) in Paris: these and other signature buildings designed by Pei and his firm have established him as one of the most distinguished architects of his generation.

In this first full-length study of the architect, Carter Wiseman, architectural critic for *New York* magazine and editor of *The Yale Alumni Magazine,* has given us a sympathetic but admirably clear-eyed overview of Pei's career. In his early chapters, Mr. Wiseman occasionally indulges in what I think of as coffee-table-book prose. There is a good bit about Pei "dressed in a faded pink polo shirt, khakis, and Tretorn tennis shoes" and the like. But once he gets down to the architecture, Mr. Wiseman is all business. Beginning with Pei's work in the late Forties for the New York developer William Zeckendorf, he concentrates on a handful of the architect's most ambitious and well-known projects, discussing the evolution and reception of each in detail.

Mr. Wiseman may be right that "Pei has emerged as the most durably creative of American architects working at the grand scale." There can be no doubt that he is a contender for that title. Yet Pei's contribution is primarily one of application, not innovation. Pei is not a form-giver in the tradition of a Mies or a Louis Kahn. As Mr. Wiseman observes, his work "is fundamentally about the creative refinement of what has gone before." While the best of Pei's buildings have an austere sculptural beauty that borders on the lyrical, a hardheaded pragmatism may well be the trademark of his architectural achievement. Something like pragmatism, at any rate, certainly has helped earn him the enormous corporate success he has enjoyed. As Mr. Wiseman notes, in an era when many architects "have built entire reputations on the skill with which they can discuss their work in polysyllabic abstractions, Pei is remarkably grounded in results. What a colleague once called an 'aedicular indication of a room,' Pei would more likely describe as a window." Perhaps it is the combination of lyricism and pragmatism that led another colleague to describe Pei as possessing a "golden tongue and titanium spine."

Though Mr. Wiseman's account of Pei's work is everywhere respectful, it is never sycophantic. Even about the works he most admires—Pei's hugely ambitious project for the Louvre, for example—he is refreshingly forthright about shortcomings. It is a measure of Mr. Wiseman's seriousness as a critic that one can admire his accomplishment while still disagreeing with many of his par-

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ticular judgments. Can it really be said, for example, the reflective glass of the sixty-story John Hancock Tower successfuly "served to dematerialize" the tower's bulk? Having recently been in Boston for a few days, I had occasion to walk by Copley Square, directly off which the building stands, a number of times. Nestled between H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church and Blackall and Hardenbergh's staid Copley Plaza Hotel, that seven-hundred-and-ninety-foot polyhedron may be said to soar; it may be said to loom, to tower, to dominate; no amount of mirror tricks can make it seem "dematerialized."

—*Roger Kimball*

Bohumil Hrabal Too Loud a Solitude. Translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 98 pages, $16.95

Though the Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal holds a degree in law, for many years, for political reasons, he was forced to make his living baling wastepaper. Out of this experience he has fashioned a compact novel about the fine art of compaction, a novel about Haňt'a, who for thirty-five years has worked a one-man hydraulic press, baling books and paper in a dank, dim-lit cellar in Prague. Haňt'a smuggles home what books he can from those the State employs him to destroy; there he pieces together the classical education that, once upon a time, was the pride of the State but now is forbidden the citizenry. His is a fitting profession for an amateur scholar living in "a onetime kingdom where it was and still is a custom, an obsession, to compact thoughts and images patiently in the heads of the population, thereby bringing them ineffable joy and even greater woe; living among people who will lay down their lives for a bale of compacted thoughts."

Haňt'a's thoughts, marinated in the beer he swills to make his workday tolerable, are a pulpy mess of the Greeks and the Prophets, of Kant and Hegel, of Jesus and Lao-tze. Those that recur most often are thoughts on guilt, for though he is the living vessel of his beloved authors' ideas, he is also, quite literally, those ideas' bloody-pawed destroyer. Haňt'a is always behind in his work; he takes pains to make each bale a splendid thing; he lines the drum of his press with Old Master prints and in its center, among "withered flowers, tinsel, and angel's hair," places a single great book, opened to a passage of especial beauty. Haňt'a's bales are no mere bales, they are reliquaries—and atonements for his shameful complicity in what he once called, to the laughter of the authorities, a crime against humanity.

Haňt'a has a dream of redemption: five years hence he will purchase his press, retire with it to a garden, and there will make one perfect bale each day from the three thousand tons of books in his personal library, "a bale," he says, "I'll never need be ashamed of . . . I'll pour all my youthful illusions into it, everything I know, everything I've learned during my thirty-five years of work . . . a bale to end all bales." His dream is shattered by the opening of an enormous new press on the outskirts of town, a press capable of compacting whole runs of books into "a single titanic bale the size of a rich man's mausoleum," a press manned by a youthful, milk-guzzling unit of the Brigade of Socialist Labor. Just one look at that towering press, gleaming in its glass-walled, sun-lit suburban building, and Haňt'a knows that it's over for him and his plans and his rites in his cellar: "This was a new era with new men and new methods." To this coming generation of press operators, all smiles and spotless coveralls and unbloodied baby-blue work gloves, a bale could never be anything but a bale.

Too Loud a Solitude, composed in the mid Seventies, loses none of its considerable poignancy in light of the recent changes in Czechoslavakia. Hrabal's portrait of a member of the "underground elite," of a man of intelligence and principle sullied by compromise with an inhumane world, will not date. It is, sadly, as timeless as Haňt'a's favorite dictum of Lao-tze: "Know thy shame and preserve thy glory."

—*Christopher Carduff*

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Letters

Louise Bogan and the Pulitzer

To the Editors:
Regarding Robert Phillips's "Visiting the Gregorys" (September 1990): To prevent creative malice from turning first into "plausible explanation" and eventually into "fact," the truth is that Louise Bogan did not race around town announcing she'd gotten the Pulitzer. The simple reason she didn't is that—Marya Zaturenska to the contrary—Bogan was never aware of being chosen for the prize. By 1941 she was even joking with Malcolm Cowley about "starting a society called Friends of L. Bogan: Why Doesn't She Win the Pulitzer?"

Why not indeed.

What amuses, however, is that in spreading the misinformation, even Zaturenska saw herself as coming in second to Bogan.

Ruth Limmer
Elizabeth Frank
New York, NY

Irving Howe at seventy

To the Editors:
Hilton Kramer's October 1990 piece, "Irving Howe at Seventy," repeats several charges aired in earlier articles, and again in what seems a deliberately misleading way. For one, Mr. Kramer describes the leading socialist intellectual in the country as having aimed for and won "a ticket to the establishment." But of course Howe does not belong to any of the established groups that wield significant power in American society. He is not a counselor to Presidents or to cabinet members or senators. His views are anathema to most captains of industry and foundation executives. Even in academic precincts he is regarded principally as an outsider, a resolute nonspecialist in an age of specialists, a practical critic in a world of "theorists," a writer of accessible prose in a profession noted for its addiction to obscurantist jargons, one who has been willing to resist fashionable movements on the academic and literary Left even when that meant alienating many who would otherwise have wished to make common cause with him. One would not suppose—reading Mr. Kramer's attack on Howe—that at critical times in his career he took arms against feminist literary criticism, spokesmen for black consciousness, participants in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and all manner of liberal sacred cows.

Similarly, one would not know from Mr. Kramer's observations on Howe's criticism of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn that he never attacked the great Russian novelist "for failing to take the politically correct position on the Bolshevik Revolution." Howe's criticism of Solzhenitsyn reflects no commitment to a doctrinaire position on Bolshevism, and Kramer knows it. Mr. Kramer also knows that Howe has written eloquently on Solzhenitsyn's great strengths as a writer and as an indispensable critic of the Soviet system. To fail to mention these other writings in the framework of an attack on Howe's failure to appreciate Solzhenitsyn is intellectually dishonest.

Equally dishonest is Kramer's suggestion that Howe, at seventy, deliberately conceals his life-

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long interest in Leon Trotsky: "We very much need to have the Trotsky component of the discussion in evidence if we are to form what Mr. Howe calls a 'fair picture' of his thinking," writes Kramer. But of course no single *Selected Writings* can possibly do justice to the breadth and diversity of a career like Howe's, which has produced a great many books on many subjects. And of course Howe's writings on Trotsky are widely available and widely known, particularly his substantial "Modern Masters" book on Trotsky. Such works are "in evidence," and it is ridiculous to pretend that the absence of such works from a new *Selected Writings* makes it difficult or impossible to consider what Howe has made of his debt to Trotsky. Kramer goes so far as to write that he hasn't "the stomach for the task" of comparing what Howe has written about Trotsky with what he has written about Solzhenitsyn. But if he hasn't the stomach for the task, why then should he insinuate that he has seriously looked into the matter and recoiled with disgust from what he saw? The implication Kramer would like us to draw is that Howe's deep absorption in Trotsky's work has been in the nature of an infatuation that has blinded Howe to awful things. But I have seen no evidence of any such disabling infatuation, and Kramer for his part offers none. And, given Howe's deep affection for much of Solzhenitsyn's work, one cannot imagine why the comparison Kramer recommends would so unnerve him.

Throughout his attack on Howe, Kramer accuses him of various forms of hypocrisy, wondering how someone who has achieved even a modicum of worldly success can *ever* have written harshly of others who wrote as "partisans of bourgeois society." Here Kramer would seem to insist upon having his man, as it were, coming and going. Blasting Howe's cover-up of his own intellectual record, he is yet unforgiving when Howe reprints from his early days sentiments that do not accord perfectly with his more recent avowals. In fact, of course, nothing in Howe's present work suggests that he has become a "partisan of bourgeois society," and the idea that someone whose many distinguished books should have won him academic honors should therefore admit to having lusted for nothing else is, well, grotesque.

But, granting that Howe early wrote things he would not write today, one wonders why Kramer would not commend his willingness to expose his frailties, his honesty in allowing his new *Selected Writings* to stand as in part a record of self-correction and growth? One would welcome in Kramer not merely a grudging concession on the occasional quality of Howe's literary essays, but some genuine effort to understand the career of Irving Howe as something other than an attempt to win a smart address on New York's East Side. Such an effort would yield a great deal more than Kramer's present essay delivers, and save Kramer from the unbecoming tendency to dismiss political foes by imputing to them crass motives instead of arguing patiently with their ideas and admitting once in a while to weaknesses and uncertainties in his own position. That much we have every right to demand from the editor of *The New Criterion*.

Robert Boyers
Florence, Italy

Hilton Kramer replies:

"Deliberately misleading," "intellectually dishonest," "grotesque" misrepresentations—these are serious charges. Or they would be in a writer who commanded even a minimum competence in the matters addressed in Robert Boyers's letter. But on the evidence of this letter, Mr. Boyers shows himself to be conspicuously lacking in such competence. He writes, rather, as a fan and hagiographer—which is nice for Irving Howe and the other members of the Left-liberal literary-academic establishment whom Mr. Boyers routinely courts with unstinting praise, but fan mail is finally no substitute for the kind of critical scrutiny their work calls for and seldom nowadays receives.

Still, Mr. Boyers's charges have been made, and must therefore be answered in some detail, alas, for we can no longer confidently assume that readers of Mr. Boyers's letter will be any less ignorant than he is about the substance of the issues involved.

Let us start with the term "establishment." From what I actually wrote on this subject in my article—"that Mr. Howe has for many years now been a member in good standing of whatever it is that passes for a literary establishment in this country"—it was perfectly clear what was meant. For those who might still be in the dark about this commonplace reference, I provided some clues:

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> With his many books, his countless contributions to the mainstream press as well as leading literary and political journals, and the coveted lectureships at Princeton, Harvard, and other elite institutions that have come his way for decades, all capped by his years as a Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York, Mr. Howe is indeed a pillar of what is sometimes called the intellectual community and something of a celebrity in the world at large.

About all this, even Mr. Howe's admirers must surely agree. So to assert, as a rebuttal to this accurate and unexceptionable description of the place occupied by Mr. Howe in our literary establishment, that "He is not a counselor to Presidents or to cabinet members or senators" is—well, what some people might call "deliberately misleading" and "intellectually dishonest," if not indeed "grotesque." I wasn't claiming, after all, that Irving Howe had spent his life as a clone of Arthur Schelsinger, Jr. But it is idle for Mr. Boyers to pretend that he is unacquainted with either the pecking order or the political character of our literary establishment when, for well on to a quarter of a century, he has labored so tirelessly to make his journal, *Salmagundi*, an appendage of its every piety and shibboleth. About many things Mr. Boyers may indeed be ignorant, but on the politics and preferments of our literary establishment he has made himself a connoisseur, and it is preposterous for him to pretend otherwise.

Then there is the question of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Now it may be true that Mr. Howe feels a "deep affection" for Solzhenitsyn's work, but in a volume designed to give us what Mr. Howe himself called "a reasonably fair picture of an intellectual career spanning four decades," what he chose to publish was an attack on Solzhenitsyn, not an expression of "deep affection." Is Mr. Boyers suggesting that the essay in *Selected Writings 1950-1990* somehow *mis*represents Mr. Howe's critical view of Solzhenitsyn? If so, that is a matter he should take up with Mr. Howe. I believe a critic—or indeed any writer—is to be judged by what he chooses to publish. And by the way, so far was I from suggesting that Mr. Howe harbored what Mr. Boyers calls "a doctrinaire position on Bolshevism" that I specifically commended his honorable record as an anti-Stalinist. What is to be regretted, as I also pointed out, is Mr. Howe's "failure," as I wrote, "to draw the appropriate implications from it."

Which brings us to Trotsky. Mr. Boyers claims that "no single *Selected Writings* can possibly do justice to the breadth and diversity of a career like Howe's," and that in any case "Howe's writings on Trotsky are widely available and widely known." On the first point it is not inappropriate to remind Mr. Boyers that writers far greater than Irving Howe—Johnson, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, to mention only the first names that come to mind—have been well represented in single volumes of their selected writings. Here again, the real question is Mr. Howe's claim to be giving us "a reasonably fair picture of an intellectual career spanning four decades," and I repeat the charge that to delete all discussion of Trotsky from this *Selected Writings* results in a very distorted "picture" of this particular "intellectual career." For Trotsky has been a key figure in Mr. Howe's political and intellectual development, and contrary to what Mr. Boyers claims, Mr. Howe's writings on Trotsky are not now "widely known" outside a very small circle of New York intellectuals.

On the question of "imputing . . . crass motives," I suggest that Mr. Boyers reread Mr. Howe's essay from the Fifties, "This Age of Conformity," if he wants to see a pro at work at the task of imputing crass motives. But then, Mr. Boyers is no slouch at this sort of thing himself. He isn't a very close reader, either, for nowhere in my essay did I suggest that Mr. Howe has "lusted for nothing else" but "academic honors." What I did write is that Mr. Howe had made it a practice to attack others for doing what he then set about doing himself. This is, I believe, what is known as hypocrisy, and I stand by the charge.

Finally, a word about a matter Mr. Boyers never addresses. Although he describes Mr. Howe as "the leading socialist intellectual" in America, he nowhere takes up the question of socialism and Mr. Howe's die-hard but disheartened defense of this discredited doctrine. What does it mean—or does it mean anything—to be "the leading socialist intellectual" in America in 1990? Mr. Howe carefully sidestepped the question in his preface to the *Selected Writings* even while including some outdated essays on the subject in the book itself, and it seems that Robert Boyers doesn't have much of a stomach for the matter, either.

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"The Heath Anthology"

To the Editors:

When I heard from a friend that *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* was the subject of an editorial in *The New Criterion* (Notes & Comments, October 1990), I looked forward to being engaged by a challenging, perhaps provoking, conservative view. Alas, what I found instead was shrill and trite rant about "affirmative-action thinking."

I challenge any reader of the anthology to show me one single work chosen on the basis of whatever your editorialist means by "affirmative-action thinking." I would not claim that all the hundreds of texts in the anthology are masterpieces. No museum—and anthologies are, among other things, literary museums—hangs *nothing* but masterpieces. On the contrary, works are included in any collection because they are historically interesting, because they represent significant artistic trends, because they have done well commercially —and for less edifying motives. It was our intention to represent the range of the cultures of the United States at many stages of development, and I think we have done reasonably well at it. We have even included far more of the traditional "masterpieces" than could be taught in any two-term American literature sequence. In fact, had your editorialist done his or her homework, what would have been clear is that *The Heath Anthology* contains as much or more work by the authors you list as important than most other American-literature anthologies.

It strikes me as particularly unfortunate that your editorialist simply reproduces the contempt for Zuni culture, to use that one example, which has been a hallmark of the genocidal practice of whites on this continent toward Indians.

Furthermore, the notion of what constitutes a "masterpiece" changes significantly over time. Let's remember that in 1920 Longfellow's "Hiawatha" would have been so acclaimed, whereas the work of Melville was all but forgotten. When I was in graduate school in the 1950s, no self-respecting student would have written a dissertation on Edith Wharton, whom your editorialist mentions with special approval. She was a "woman writer," and to many 1950s critics the two terms of that phrase were substantially contradictory. By contrast, James Gould Cozzens's novels were then hailed as "masterpieces"; where is he now?

Your editorialist expresses pious contempt for my account of the racial and gender mix of the editorial board of *The Heath Anthology*. What he or she fails to recognize is that in the ninety or so years in which academic anthologies of American literature have been published, never once had a scholar who is not white served on an editorial board. In fact, until late in the 1980s only two white women had so served. Perhaps these facts are unimportant; perhaps the white men who created all the anthologies did display the catholicity of taste and the breadth of scholarship necessary to determine what constituted "American literature" for all of us. If you believe that, you will believe that George Wallace spoke for all Alabamians when he stood in the schoolhouse door to block integration. In fact, the diversity of that editorial board forced all of us, unlike your editorialist, to rethink our criteria for what to include in an anthology and for how to organize texts in interesting and useful ways.

A great many members of the professoriat seem to approve of what we have done: the anthology is already in a second printing, adopted within this, its first year, at over 350 colleges and universities, and more coming aboard every day. No doubt your editorialist would mark that as a sign of the degeneracy of the times. But perhaps even readers of *The New Criterion* might wish to determine for themselves whether *The Heath Anthology* is a symbol of cultural decay or, rather, a thoroughly enjoyable, occasionally provoking, pedagogically challenging text that displays as well as anything has the wonderful diversity characteristic of American civilization since its beginnings.

Paul Lauter
Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles
Smith Professor of English
Trinity College
Hartford, CT

The Editors reply:

We are grateful to Professor Lauter for favoring us with this specimen example of contemporary academic multicultural piety. We particularly admire the way he has managed to adduce George

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Wallace, the Zunis, and "the genocidal practice of whites on this continent toward Indians," thus evoking that halo of political self-righteousness without which a good multiculturist feels bereft, even in a discussion of literature.

We recognize of course that literary values are not the sort of thing that Professor Lauter and his fellow champions of "diversity" are in the habit of taking seriously. Nevertheless, we must point out that the title of the fifty-five-hundred-page work that this professor of English edited is not *The Heath Anthology of American Ethnography.* Nor is it *The Heath Anthology of American Anthropological Curiosities.* It is *The Heath Anthology of American Literature.*

Readers—and, especially, readers who are students—therefore had a right to expect that the contents of these tomes would reflect the exercise of literary judgment. That is, they had the right to expect that the primary principle of selection in a book advertising itself as an anthology of American literature would be literary excellence, not membership in one or another perceived "victim" group.

It is precisely this expectation that Professor Lauter and his colleagues have consistently disappointed. For them—as for all of our new multiculturalists—the issue is not literary quality but statistical representation and political moralizing. This substitution of political imperatives for artistic or intellectual quality is at the very heart of the "affirmative-action thinking" to which Professor Lauter refers.

Such imperatives are also at the heart of the editorial policy of *The Heath Anthology.* As a glance at its table of contents reveals, deference to the dictates of political rectitude has required that every population group be represented, whether or not it has made a genuine contribution to American letters. The Zunis, alas—like many of the groups and many, many of the authors included in this misconceived work—conspicuously did not make such a contribution. To pretend otherwise may soothe one's multicultural anxieties; it is certainly to abdicate one's responsibilities as a teacher, an editor, and a critic. To counter that literary tastes have changed over the years—and we do thank Professor Lauter for that novel insight—does nothing to alter those responsibilities.

Professor Lauter is naturally delighted that a "great many members of the professoriat seem to approve" of *The Heath Anthology.* Who would doubt it? We are sure that his publishers are at least equally delighted. But Professor Lauter is correct in surmising that we count the widespread adoption of *The Heath Anthology* as a textbook "a sign of the degeneracy of the times." More to the point, we count it a sign of the triumph of the multicultural ethos that is currently sweeping our campuses and transforming the teaching of the humanities into a species of left-wing political activism.

We titled our editorial on this irresponsible production "The Heath Travesty of American Literature." Professor Lauter's letter reminds us why.

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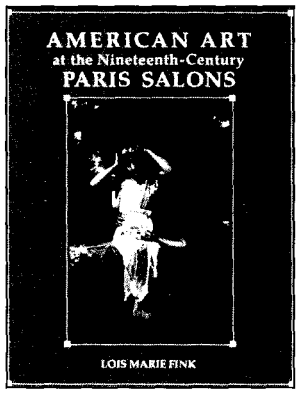

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Lois Marie Fink
Curator of Research at the
National Museum of American Art,
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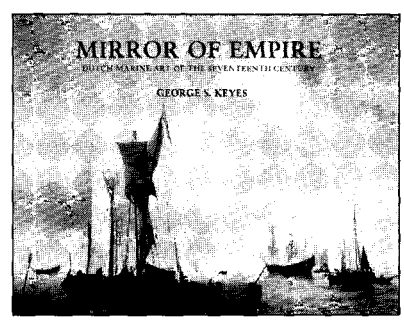

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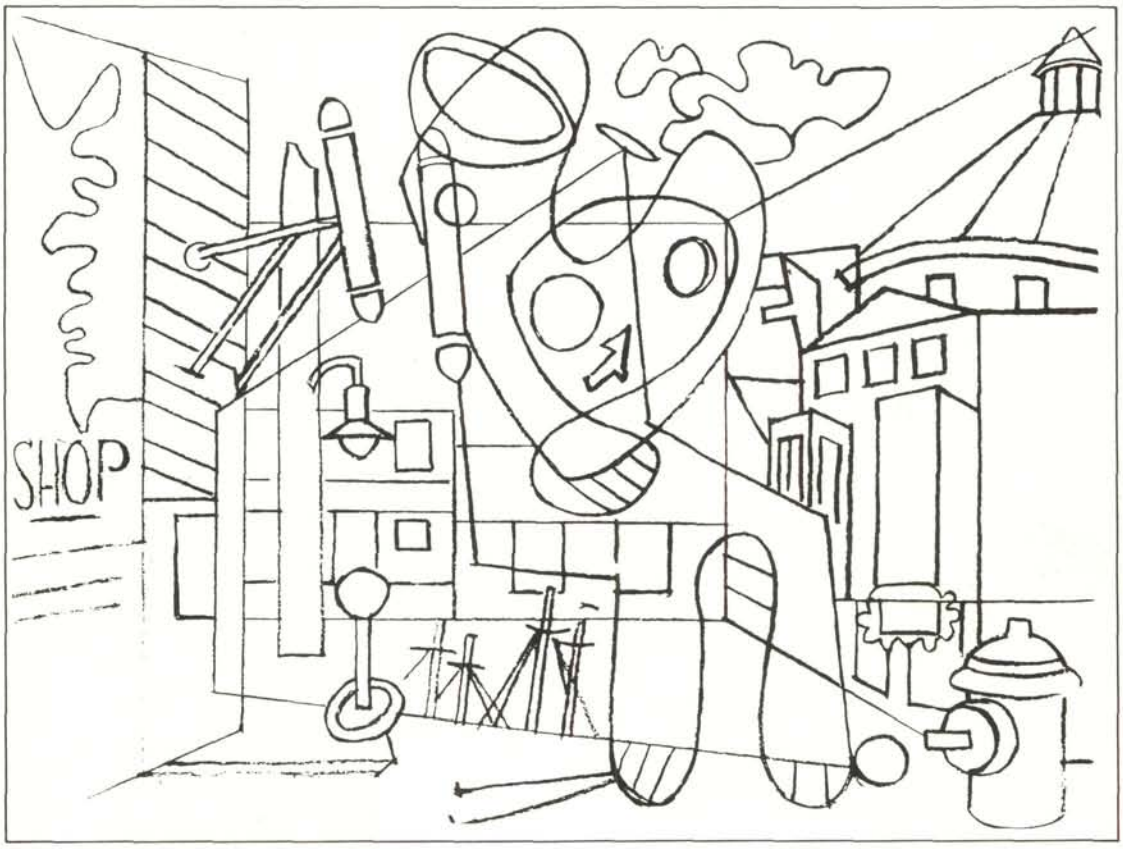

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